

Keeping In Touch

August 2008

The Village Employee Assistance Program

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren *Common Emotions and Strategies*

Families headed by grandparents are an increasing presence in American society. U.S. Census figures (2003) reveal that more than six million children are living in households headed by grandparents or other close relatives. Nearly 5.8 million grandparents are living in homes with one or more of their own grandchildren under the age of 18.

Children in the care of grandparents may come to their current living situations from diverse circumstances, but most share a lack of consistency in their early lives. Discipline may have been inconsistent and inappropriate, meals may often have been sporadic, and daily schedules left to chance. These factors contributed to the conflicting emotions experienced by many children raised by grandparents. The following tips will help grandparents deal with their grandchildren's conflicting emotions.

Grief and Loss

- Verbally acknowledge the child's losses. Discuss changes in the child's life and what they've had to "leave behind."
- Take photos of the child in his/her new environment (custodial grandchildren may have little documentation of their early years). Display on a bulletin board or collage.
- Read the story *Boomer's Big Day* by Constance McGeorge. Cut out a paper suitcase. Assist the child in locating pictures in magazines or newspapers of items they would choose to take with them if moving. Fill the suitcase by pasting magazine pictures inside.

Guilt

- Provide many opportunities each day to enhance the child's self-esteem. Allow them to "help" as frequently as possible and reinforce their efforts.
- Read the story *Jamaica's Find* by Juanita Havill. Allow grandchildren to dictate their own story if desired.
- Praise the child consistently for even small, positive gains. Keep feedback genuine but look for opportunities to "catch" the child in desired behaviors.
- Discuss the concept that everyone makes mistakes. Brainstorm ways to apologize/make things right again when mistakes occur.

Fear

- Provide consistency in both caregivers and environment.
- Establish routines for separation. Read Audrey Penn's *The Kissing Hand*.
- Reinforce "brave behaviors." Start a sticker chart and provide stickers for each brave behavior displayed. Remember, for a fearful child, a "brave" behavior may be something as simple as smiling at a friend or not crying when separating from Grandma.

Grandparents *continued on back*

"Keeping in Touch" is a monthly publication provided to employees covered by The Village Employee Assistance Program (EAP) through their employer's benefit package. If you have questions about your EAP benefit, or if you would like to access services, call

1-800-627-8220

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Counselor Column



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Q: *I'm raising my young grandchildren. How do I take care of myself?*

A: In the last 10 years, the number of American children living with their grandparents has increased by 50 percent. While raising your grandchildren can bring you great joy, it also comes with special challenges.

The following tips will help you cope with raising your grandchildren while giving them the guidance and direction they need.

Take care of your physical health.

Raising grandchildren is hard work and can take a toll on your health. Get regular check-ups, take your medication as directed, maintain a healthy diet and get some exercise. Your grandchildren need you to be healthy so you can continue to care for them. Maintaining your health will also help you have the energy you need to keep up with your grandchildren.

Allow yourself to grieve. Raising your grandchildren results in giving up the traditional grandparent role to step into the

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**The Village
Business Institute**
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- Many children are frightened of being alone in the dark. Purchase a small flashlight and allow the grandchild to decorate it. Keep the flashlight next to (or in!) his/her bed each night.

Embarrassment

- Assist the grandchild in developing answers to questions that other children or adults may ask about their home life.
- Be alert to ways to assist the grandchild in “fitting in.” Search out what afterschool options (i.e., sport teams, Scouts, musical groups, etc.) are available and popular with other children.
- Talk to other caregivers about clothing and activities.
- Read The Ugly Duckling by Hans Christian Anderson or Elmer the Elephant by David McKee. Discuss how animals and people can be “different” and “special.” Assist the grandchild in making a list or collage that depicts their own uniqueness.
- Share a humorous and embarrassing moment with the child. Focus on laughing about this situation at a later time. Discuss what one can learn about themself.

Anger

- Look for opportunities to model appropriate expressions of anger. Identify the feeling and show how it can be managed correctly. For example, “I’m really angry that I broke this bowl. I’m going to go away by myself for a few minutes until I calm down. Then I’ll come back and pick up the broken pieces.”
- Provide a variety of outlets for expressing anger. Options include pounding clay or pillows, finger painting to wild music, running in place, taking ten deep breaths or listening to quiet music.
- Read Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day by Judith Viorst. Laugh about Alexander’s many troubles and discuss how the next day will be different for him.
- Prevent angry feelings from building up by insuring that grandchildren get some exercise (preferably outdoors) each and every day. Go for a walk, visit a playground, dance to wild music, or kick a soccer ball. Fifteen minutes of exercise each day will go a long way toward preventing angry outbursts in many young children.

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role of parent. This may be a huge adjustment. Allowing yourself to grieve the loss of the grandparent-grandchild relationship you anticipated will help you navigate the adjustment. You may also need to grieve the loss of the plans you had for this time in your life.

Maintain your social connections. Even though you have started to raise children again, you have the right to have your own life. As you find yourself immersed in school, homework and other activities, make a concerted effort to maintain your social and community connections so you don’t become isolated.

Develop a financial plan. You didn’t plan to support more than one or two people during your retirement years. Now, all of sudden, you have a family with all the additional costs of raising children. Make a spending plan (budget) so you can see how much money you’ll need each month to make ends meet. Go to www.HelpWithMoney.org, or call The Village Financial Resource Center at 701-235-3328 for a free spending plan. Learn as much as you can about special tax credits, public benefits, and local resources available to assist you in providing for your grandchildren.

Decide how you want to parent. It is a different culture in which to raise children and teenagers than when you raised your own children, and how you parented them may be different from how you want to parent now. Especially if the fact that your children aren’t able to parent makes you feel like you “failed” in raising your own children. Consider taking one of the many parenting classes offered throughout the community.

Look into the legal issues. It is very disruptive to children to have them shuffled back and forth between your home and their parent’s home. If you realize that your child is unlikely to maintain a life that enables them to provide continuous care for their children, consider seeking and maintaining legal custody or guardianship. Legal guardianship of your grandchildren is important for your ability to make decisions regarding your grandchildren’s well being, and to access public and community programs from which your grandchildren may benefit.

Talk to your grandkids. Maintain a strong and trusting relationship with your grandchildren so you can talk to them about any worries they might have—feeling unsafe, what will happen to Grandma and Grandpa and who will take care of them if Grandma and Grandpa can’t, and worries about the welfare of their parents.

Face the conflict between you and your adult child. Your adult child may not like the decisions you make regarding their children (your grandchildren), or may feel like they can drop in and take charge, undermining any progress you’ve made in developing an appropriate “parenting” relationship with your grandchildren. If the conflict between you and your adult child is great, you may need support from mental health or counseling professionals in the community.

Ask for help. If you need a break, call a friend to babysit; if your grandchild is having behavior problems, talk to someone at the school and/or see a counselor; if you need to talk to someone who understands, join a support group. Enlisting the support of your friends, family and the community will help you cope with the challenges of raising your grandchildren.