

FACTS *for* FAMILIES

No. 77

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GRANDPARENTS RAISING GRANDCHILDREN

Grandparents are an important resource for both parents and children. They routinely provide child care, financial assistance and emotional support. Occasionally they are called upon to provide much more including temporary or full time care and responsibility for their grandchildren.

An increasing number of children in the United States live in households headed by a grandparent. This trend is due to:

- increasing numbers of single parent families
- the high rate of divorce
- teenage pregnancies
- AIDS
- incarcerations of parents
- substance abuse by parents
- death or disability of parents
- parental abuse and neglect

In many of these homes, neither of the child's biological parents is present. In most cases, children taken care of by grandparents move in with them as infants or preschoolers and remain with them for five years or more. These grandparents are a diverse group ranging in ages from the thirties to the seventies. Many grandparents are ready to simplify their lives and slow down. Giving that up and taking over the responsibilities of being a primary parent again can stir up many feelings including grief, anger, loss, resentment and possibly guilt. This transition can be very stressful and the emotional and financial burdens can be significant. Culture shock at having to deal with children and adolescents of a different generation can be great. Grandparent headed households have a significantly higher poverty rate than other kinds of family units.

Many grandparents in this care taking role underestimate or are unaware of the added burdens their new role as parents will place upon them. Grandparents often assume their role will be to nurture and reward children without having to set limits. When grandparents serve as parents, however, they must learn to set limits and establish controls as they did with their own children.

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Many children living with grandparents arrive with preexisting problems or risk factors including abuse, neglect, prenatal exposure to drugs and alcohol, and loss of parents (death, abandonment and incarceration). This situation can create risks for both children and grandparents. Caring for your grandchild can also be very positive and rewarding. Grandparents bring the benefit of experience and perspective. They can also provide important stability, predictability, and be a healthy role model for their grandchildren.

It is very important for grandparents to receive support and assistance. Seeking out other family members, clergy, support groups and social agencies can be helpful. The Grandparents Information Center (sponsored by the American Association of Retired Persons) is a good place to get information, referrals and support. The American Association of Retired Persons website address is www.aarp.org. Financial aid may be available especially if the child was abandoned, neglected or abused. Mental health professionals including child and adolescent psychiatrists, community mental health and child welfare agencies and parent-teacher associations are other important resources for the grandparents.

Child and adolescent psychiatrists recognize the important role many grandparents play in raising their grandchildren. The better grandparents are able to meet their own needs, the better they can fulfill the demands of parenting.

For additional information see *Facts for Families*:

#1 Children and Divorce,

#15 The Adopted Child,

#64 Foster Care, and

#74 Advocating for Your Child.

See also: *Your Child* (1998 Harper Collins)/*Your Adolescent* (1999 Harper Collins).

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The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) represents over 7,000 child and adolescent psychiatrists who are physicians with at least five years of additional training beyond medical school in general (adult) and child and adolescent psychiatry.

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