

Grandparents as Caregivers: Heartbreak and Hope

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Facts

Nationally, 2.4 million grandparent-headed households report responsibility for 4.5 million grandchildren (6.3 percent of all children under age 18). This represents a 30 percent increase from 1990 to 2000.

About 29,000 children live in 18,000 grandparent headed-households in Kansas. Over the last 10 years, this number has increased by 43 percent, an increase that places Kansas in the top third of states that are experiencing an increased rate of grandparents as primary caregivers for children.

The largest numbers of Kansas children living in grandparents' homes are Caucasian. Other racial/ethnic groups also provide a significant percentage of children in the care of grandparents, including African-American (17 percent), and Hispanic/Latino (11 percent).

Of the children living in households headed by grandparents or other relatives in Kansas, more than a half (just over 16,000) live there without either parent present.

Increases from 1990 to 2000 among certain racial/ethnic groups have been higher, indicating the fastest growing segment of children living in grandparent-headed homes are Hispanic, with the African-American segment close behind.

Grandparents who take on this vital role are making a great contribution to our society. Translated into dollars, Kansas saves an average of \$25,000 a year for every child kept out of the foster care system.

What Grandparents Sacrifice

Grandparents have always played a critical role in providing support to their children when they become parents. Taking responsibility as the primary caregiver for their grandchildren was once an unusual circumstance that is becoming more common. Adult children should realize that there is a cost to shifting their responsibility for childrearing to their children's grandparents.

First, grandparents have unique contributions to offer their grandchildren that could be lost when they assume the role of parents.

Conversely, children have a lot to offer grandparents that could be missed when grandparents are in a primary caregiving role.

Second, being a parent requires a significant psychological commitment. After launching their children into adulthood, becoming a full-time caregiver again can cause psychological strain. Grandparents have taken the responsibility for childrearing once. They may not have the psychological endurance to do it again.

Third, being a parent requires a significant physical commitment. Although grandparents younger than 50 years of age may have the physical endurance for childrearing, older grandparents could put their health at risk when they assume this responsibility.

Becoming a grandparent is a unique, powerful opportunity. Children need responsive parents. They also thrive from the love of grandparents. When they are harmoniously integrated, both resources are critical for a child's well being. Grandparents will assume the responsibility of childrearing, if necessary, out of love. When this happens children may lose more than a connection to their parents; they may lose what makes their grandparents special.

What Children Sacrifice

Grandparents can offer grandchildren something unique that parents cannot provide. Of

course, this depends on grandparents committing themselves to a relationship with their grandchildren.

First, grandparents are powerful. Their age and position has elevated them in the eyes of children to the level of true-life superheroes. They can do things children's parents cannot do, or they can do these things better. For example, when I backed over my son's new bicycle with my car, completely twisting its frame and wheels, he stopped crying when he remembered that his paternal grandparents were going to visit us the following weekend. "Grandpa will fix it!" he declared.

Second, grandparents are special friends. They can be friends because they are not in charge. Children can sense the magnetism of the love without the antagonism of authority. Grandparents should set limits when their grandchildren visit and may have to introduce consequences when they misbehave. Even so, children can sense a certain freedom in the absence of the obligation required of a primary caregiver. A 90-year-old woman told me about a delightful afternoon with her 7-year-old great grandchild. They played dress up and made tea. When she hugged the child as she left to return home, she told her, "Oh honey, your visit was so much FUN!" The child responded as she walked out the door, "I think so too Gramma — and there were NO adults around!"

Third, grandparents can serve as models of graceful aging. Children

who have contact with loving grandparents who take their aging in stride have fewer negative stereotypes of the elderly and of aging. They are less afraid of growing older.

These contributions are at risk when grandparents become parents once again. Adult children should realize that their children could miss something special when their grandparents become their parents.

Obviously, there are circumstances when grandparents have to assume the responsibility. Loving grandparents will do what is necessary to ensure the well being of their grandchildren, even if it means making a sacrifice that will cause heartache. Children appreciate that their grandparents are looking after them.

When that happens, grandparents can do the following to moderate the potential risks.

The Response for Grandparents

1. Consult with a lawyer to understand your legal rights and responsibilities. You will need to obtain the legal right to access health, education, financial, and legal records and documents available for children in your care. You should also create a will that ensures custody of the child to another loving caregiver in the event of your death.
2. Take care of your physical health. Consult regularly with a health care professional. Eat properly and participate regularly in low-impact exercise.
3. Participate in or start a support group for grandparents who have a significant responsibility for raising their grandchildren. A support group will provide you with information and nurture you emotionally and psychologically.
4. Become informed about social services in your community. This might include counseling, respite care, mentoring, tutoring, and activities for grandchildren. If you feel overwhelmed when trying to “navigate the system,” find an advocate who can guide you.
5. Approach the challenge as a learner. Take free online courses on anger management, child guidance, nurturing self-respect, and how to be an effective helper at The WonderWise Parent (<http://www.ksu.edu/wwparent/courses/>).
6. Become a part of your grandchildren’s lives. Take time to learn what they enjoy, and participate in their activities as best you can. Rediscover and nourish what is childlike in you. Do things with them that leave pleasant memories.



Resources

For more information and resources, visit the *Grandparenting* page of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP):
www.aarp.org/families/grandparents/

For additional perspectives on grandparenting, consider these books:

The Essential Grandparent: A Guide to Making a Difference by Lillian Carson (HCI, 1997).

Grandparents as Parents: A Survival Guide for Raising a Second Family by Sylvie de Toledo and Deborah Edler Brown (The Guilford Press, 1995).

The Grandparent Guide: The Definitive Guide to Coping with the Challenges of Modern Grandparenting by Arthur Kornhaber (McGraw-Hill, 2002).

Grandparents' Rights: What Every Grandparent Needs to Know by Patricia Perkins Slorah (Authorhouse, 2003).

Just Grandparents: When a Child is Born, So are the Grandparents by Bonnie Louise Kuchler (Willow Creek Press, 2004).

Raising Our Children's Children by Deborah Doucette-Dudman (Fairview Press, 1997).

Relatives Raising Children: An Overview of Kinship Care by Joseph Crumbley (CWLA Press, 1997).

The Twelve Rules of Grandparenting: A New Look at Traditional Roles and How to Break Them by Susan M. Kettmann (Checkmark Books, 1999).

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