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Grandparents Raising Their Grandchildren

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It takes a lot of work every day, to be a patient, kind, skillful, communicative, active, and optimistic parent for your grandchildren. All parents make mistakes. Good parents learn from them. There are no perfect parents, but thoughtful, joyful, committed parents are truly “grand” parents (Williams, 2000, p. 48).

The Numbers

Grandparents raising grandchildren is not a new phenomenon. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, nationally there are 4.5 million children living in grandparent-headed households (6.3% of all children under age 18). This represents a 30% increase from 1990 to 2000. Another 1.5 million children are living in households headed by other relatives (2.1% of all children under 18).

Ohio has 157,298 children living in grandparent-headed households (5.4% of all children in the state). Another 35,333 children are living in households headed by other relatives (1.2% of all children in Ohio). Of the children who are living in households headed by grandparents or other relatives in Ohio, 76,794 are living there without either parent present.

Every state had some grandchildren less than 18 years of age living with grandparents. About half of the grandchildren living in grandparent-headed households were from the following ten states: California, Texas, New York, Florida, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Ohio,

Michigan, North Carolina, and Georgia (2000 U.S. Census Data by State).

Why Are the Numbers Increasing?

A multitude of societal changes contribute to the increasing number of grandchildren living with grandparents including:

- Illness
- Economic hardship
- Divorce
- Domestic violence
- Substance abuse
- Incarceration
- Mental illness
- Other challenges

Challenges Facing Custodial Grandparents

In a survey of 4,700 grandparents conducted by the American Association of Retired Persons Grandparent Information Center, the length of time grandparents served as primary caregiver was 31% for less than a year, 20% for one to two years, and 49% for more than two years. More than 7 out of 10 grandparents indicated their role as the primary caregiver was permanent, 11% temporary, and 17% were unsure of the status. Permanent and temporary custodial grandparents will encounter a variety of parental concerns, for example, discipline

issues, financial support resources, legal issues (i.e., grandparents' rights, custody options), and most importantly, taking care of themselves (Blackburn, 2000). In addition, many grandchildren may have special medical, psychological, and educational needs, often caused by parental mistreatment or neglect.

Grandparents raising grandchildren may also experience stress in dealing with adult children. For example, there may be concerns about the following issues:

- Conflict over disciplinary decisions
- Visits from parents under the influence of drugs or alcohol
- The adult children will assert their parental rights
- Shame related to their adult child's behavior

Finally, grandparents may also have fears about what will happen to their grandchildren if they are not able to take care of them.

Help Is Available

Support is available and grandparents should never feel that they are alone. Social agencies and organizations are available to help custodial grandparents deal with their many responsibilities and concerns. A directory of services is available from Ohio State University Extension through the Grandparents Raising Their Grandchildren web site at: <http://sandusky.osu.edu/family-consumer-sciences/grandparents-raising-their-grandchildren>. Grandparents who do not have Internet access can visit local public libraries to access the web site. This web site provides information in the following areas: child care, clothing, education, employment, family support services, financial assistance, health care, hunger, housing and homelessness, legal issues, toll-free phone numbers, resources, and Extension resources.

The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) Grandparent Information Center provides information and resources to help grandparents cope with their primary caregiving roles. For information, contact the AARP Grandparent Information Center at 601 E Street, NW, Washington, DC 20049, telephone 1-888-687-AARP (or 1-888-687-2277) from 7 a.m. to midnight Eastern Standard Time.

The opportunity for grandparents to take on the responsibility of raising a grandchild is usually not planned. As a result, many grandparents may feel alone and unprepared. Fortunately grandparents can find support from many available sources to assist them in this new role.

References

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For more information, visit the Human Development and Family Life web site at: <http://www.hec.ohio-state.edu/familife/>

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