

Advice for Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

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Joan knows first-hand the difficulties and challenges of raising two young grandchildren on her own. In 2004, upon the death of her daughter due to a drug overdose, Joan became responsible for the care of her two granddaughters then 5 and 3 years old. Since that time Joan has experienced a number of challenges in caring for her granddaughters including frequent emotional outbursts, difficulty with adjustment to school, and problems with discipline. On top of all this Joan struggles with her own unresolved grief issues, and bouts of depression, as well as self-doubt and guilt over “what she could have done differently in raising her daughter.” Each new day is a struggle for Joan who feels very much alone.

Unfortunately, Joan’s story is not all that uncommon. Grandparents raising grandchildren is a major cultural phenomenon of the early 21st century in the United States. According to the U. S. Census Bureau 4.5 million children nationally and 143,523 children in Michigan are living in grandparent-headed households. This is 6.3% of all children under the age of 18. Many current trends including divorce, HIV/AIDS, drug abuse, and child abuse contribute to this grandparent caregiving phenomenon. Although, this trend is disturbing the good news is that there are loving, dedicated, and often heroic grandparents like Joan doing what needs to be done to provide for the needs of their grandchildren. It is important that we let these grandparents know that they are not alone and provide them with the support that they need in this often difficult and unexpected caregiving role.

To this end, the AARP Grandparent Information Center offers the following advice to grandparents raising grandchildren:

Take care of yourself and make healthy lifestyle choices such as getting proper nutrition, exercise, health screening and medical care. “Think of good health as your gift to your grandchildren.”

Face your feelings whatever they may be. Guilt, anger, and frustration are all common feelings for grandparents raising grandchildren. It is important recognize these feelings then do what you have to get on with your life. It may help to attend a support group and/or discuss your feelings with someone else, a friend, relative, or professional.

Make sure that you are taking occasional breaks from caregiving to recharge your batteries, and be sure to include some fun activities in your life. When you do take time for yourself you will feel happier and healthier and your grandchildren will enjoy being around you.

Don’t hesitate to ask for help. You may be surprised at how many friends, family and neighbors are willing to help you out. You may also want to connect with a support group, your faith community, or a local service provider for assistance.

Get organized by setting realistic goals and priorities. This will help you to better manage your limited time. To be successful in doing this you may need to first manage your attitude by recognizing that “you don’t have to do everything” and “you don’t have to be perfect.”

If you are a grandparent involved in raising one or more grandchildren you may find the following resources helpful:

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Educational Support Groups - Grand Rapids Community College, with funding from the Older American’s Act Title III-E administered by the Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan, offers two monthly Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Educational Support Groups. Information is available at www.grcc.edu/olc or by calling (616) 234-3483.

Grandparent Resource Center – Life Guidance Services provides a grandparent support group as well as a variety of grandparent information and resources. For more information contact (616) 954-1992 or go to www.lifeguidanceservices.org.

Information and Referral Services – Information on the wide variety of services available within the community is available free of charge through the Heart of West Michigan United Way by calling 2-1-1 or (616) 459-2255. Aging specific information and service provider referrals can be obtained by contacting the Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan at (616) 456-5664 or 888-456-5664.

Legal Hotline – Michigan residents 60 and older can receive free legal advice on general legal issues affecting seniors including issues related grandparent or kinship care. The toll-free number for Michigan residents is (800) 347-5297.

The Kinship Care Resource Center – This center provides statewide services to relative caregivers including a toll-free legal hotline; information and referral on finances, support groups, and other community resources; sponsors workshops, trainings and conferences; and provides advocacy support. For assistance call (517) 355-9600 or contact the hotline at (800) 535-1218.

Websites of Interest – The following national websites are also good resources:

AARP Grandparent Information Center – www.aarp.org/grandparents

Adoption Information Clearinghouse - <http://naic.acf.hhs.gov/>

Generations United – www.gu.org

KINship Information Network – www.kinsupport.org

National Committee of Grandparents for Children’s Rights -

www.grandparentsforchildren.org

Caregiver’s Corner is provided as a public service of the Caregiver Resource Network. The Caregiver Resource Network is a collaboration of West Michigan organizations dedicated to providing for the needs and welfare of family and professional caregivers within the community. Funded by the Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan with Older American’s Act Title III-E, Family Caregiver Support funds. For more information consult our website at www.caregiverresource.net or call toll free at 1-888-456-5664.