

Caregiver's Corner Column (September 2010)

What "Back to School" means for the Family Caregiver

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We know fall is soon approaching when we start seeing advertisements for clothing, sales on notebooks, pens, pencils, and everything children need to be successful for the following school year. My favorite is the advertisements showing the relieved mother watching her children get on the school bus, watching them wave out the bus window, while she looks at them lovingly. The next frame is usually a relaxed mother enjoying the peace and quiet of her home, alone, with no special commitments or responsibilities. It is a great scene, but how much of it is reality?

I know for myself, being a family caregiver for over thirteen years, Back to School is actually a stressful time. I have spent many a Labor Day (usually sitting on a beach) near tears in anticipation of the busyness of home (caregiving for a loved one, as well as my children), and dreading the Fall Sports season. With five school age children, we often have each one of them in a sport as well as an extracurricular activity such as band or orchestra. How do we do this, and why do we do this? The thing of it is it is not the fault of my kids, my family member, or me, that we are family caregivers. It is what it is. I often say, we do not choose our "cards", we play the hand we are dealt.

Professionals working with family caregivers often try to provide reassurance and support to caregivers who are caught in that "Sandwich Generation". Don't try to do too much, ask for help, designate tasks to other family members, etc. Not only is this good advice, it is something that caregivers have to do in order to meet all the challenges of having to meet these responsibilities.

Back to school can be especially tricky for the family caregivers who work full time. In my family, my oldest son is a senior in high school, there are three in between, and my youngest son is in first grade. Since the oldest one drives, he has had to assume some responsibility of assisting with transportation services. If necessary, he can drive Grandma to doctor's appointments, and with the help of one or two teenage sisters they can accompany her if needed. He also picks his younger siblings up from various after-school activities, and even takes his older sister to early morning orchestra practices. Do I feel guilty about how much my children help out not only with Grandma, but also with things around the house! Yes, sometimes, but I have had some beautiful moments with my children that have made me realize how their life experience has helped shape them into caring young people who are learning to anticipate the needs other people may have. I remember when my son, Garrett, came home from the first day of class when he was in third grade. He said, "Mom, we had to introduce ourselves and tell about our families in class today. I was the only person who lived with their grandma, can you believe that?" I just shook my head and put my arms around him, and realized for the first time

that Garrett had never lived in a home without his grandmother, siblings, mother and father. I assured him that our family situation was not at all unusual, and that more and more families are living with the older generations.

I believe elder care in America is changing. It is changing how we live, how we work, and the choices we make in our daily lives. Family caregivers, if well-supported by community resources, can find that they are able to keep a loved one at home a lot longer than they originally might have thought they could. This not only has a financial benefit for us as a nation, but an emotional benefit by educating young people on how to be compassionate toward another generation.

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.