

# Caregiver's Corner Column (February 2010)

## **Celebrating the Multigenerational Family**

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We Care 4 U @ Home

“The family unit plays a critical role in our society and in the training of the generation to come.”

-- Sandra Day O'Connor

3.9 million U.S. households define ‘family’ as three to four generations sharing a single dwelling. Grandparents reside in their children’s home in 33% of these, and in 65% a grandparent remains the householder whose children and grandchildren reside with him/her. In 2% of these, grandparents and great-grandparents, as well as children and grandchildren were living in the home. Hawaii (8.2 percent), California (5.6 percent), and Mississippi (5.2 percent) have the three highest proportions of multigenerational households in the nation. This increasing trend continues with the aging of the baby boomer, financial need, cultural/individual beliefs, or individual situations.

As many Americans live well into their 90s, we will soon see the first wave of centurions. A female reaching 65 today can expect to live another 20 years, unfortunately without sufficient retirement and savings to afford the monthly expense of a quality retirement facility. A 2002 study from The Education Policy Center of MSU, found that 66% of Michigan’s children lived in married couple families, dropping from 75% in 1980.

76% of Michigan residents agree children ought to let aging parents live with them when parents can no longer live alone. Adult children, spouses, and parents must talk regarding money, space, time management and individual roles of family members. The financial situation of a parent is often not talked about, but it is so important to discuss how they will contribute to the household budget.

One gentleman expressed finding much more purpose after moving in with his daughter’s family. He picks the children up from school, completes some of the grocery shopping and prepares spaghetti and meatballs for the family dinner weekly. Friends and family notice a little more kick in his step, and he feels that his presence is an added bonus for his grandchildren, expressed in his own words, “I exert a lot of influence on them.”

Redefining roles and redistribution of household responsibilities requires a period of adaptation. Physical accommodations may be needed – such as a ramp into the house, or child-proofing some rooms. Providing necessary privacy for all household members may also be very challenging.

Care-giving is a recent phenomenon, with only five percent of the U.S. population over 65 in 1935 verses twelve percent today. 27% of women and an increasing 21% of men say they are assisting an elderly relative. These roles may be more evenly divided between members of a multigenerational household with clear boundaries resulting from positive and open communication.

Individuals often discover an emotional closeness formed with physical proximity. Grandparents and Great-Grandparents assist with the growth and development of grandchildren, and are able to share family history. Grandchildren learn how to care for their elders. Family members help to balance busy schedules, and share in daily activities. The constant companionship often assists in alleviating feelings of loneliness, and sharing financial responsibilities allow individuals to save for the future.

Large metropolitan areas are redefining local community and senior centers boasting amenities such as: Adult Lounge, Reading Area, Kitchenette, Art Gallery, Community Services, Dance Room Aerobics/Fitness Room, Game Room, Multi-sport Area, Suspended Jogging Track, Childcare, Adult Day Care, and Teaching Kitchen. These multi-generational centers prove to be time savers for parents and adult children juggling multiple schedules.

Functional and rewarding multi-generational households are created most successfully when individuals utilize the following tips:

- Open communication on a regular basis.
- All members have separate and shared space.
- Decisions are made in advance.
- Discuss length of stay – temporary, permanent, renegotiation.
- Establish boundaries.
- Never make assumptions.

***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](http://www.CaregiverResource.net) or call toll free at 1-888-456-5664.