

## The Changing Role of Caregivers: Grandparents

Raising children is a difficult task, and there's a reason that people are typically in their 20s and 30s when they have kids. Raising *grandchildren* (or in other cases nieces, nephews, cousins, and even younger siblings) is an even more challenging undertaking.

A growing number of grandparents who have given years of love, money, time and energy to their first family, find themselves giving those same things to their children's children.

Grandparents returning to the role of primary caregivers find themselves recreating their relationship with their children who cannot raise their own offspring. Conflicting emotions of love and resentment are compounded by grandparents' new role as the primary caregiver. How do you, as a grandparent, balance support for your adult child with raising the offspring of that same child? Here are some ideas you might find useful and some resources for helping you make those adjustments. That grandchild is a precious gift, and you also have your own gifts to help you with your new role in their lives.

**What can you do to make the adjustment the easiest for you, your spouse, and the child who just entered your home?**



Reflect on your past parenting. Think about what you did that made you a good parent. What would you have done differently? How can you apply what you have learned to the way you want to raise this child? You might also want to:

- Write down your feelings. Then, discuss these memories and ideas with your spouse, and trusted relatives and friends.

It helps to make plans for your new role as grandparent.

- Consider parenting courses. The support and parenting ideas may help you raise this new, young member of your household with more ease and grace, and help you get connected with others.

- Check out books and DVDs from [our lending library](#) or the public library about

grandparenting and good parenting ideas.

- Join grandparent support groups and foster parent support groups.

**Many grandparents walk the tightrope of raising grandchildren whose parents come into the lives of their children only to leave again.**

**How are you going to handle that?**

- Keep a record of all communication, visits and contacts with your adult child. This informs the social workers about what is happening, and can be important in legal proceedings.

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- Talk to your child if possible. Work out visitations, financial matters, and how his or her boundaries have changed in regard to their child.
- Discuss what your child needs to do to become a better parent and get her life in order. Written contracts with stated goals and expectations give you a basis to talk and to refer to when needed.
- Get to know your legal and decision making powers. Lay them on the table with your child. In most family situations like this, it will help to get an attorney or legal advice to define your rights and those of your child who is relinquishing parenting to you.
- Work with your county social workers. They can help you know your rights, find ways to communicate with your adult child, and give you the piece of mind that comes with knowing how to handle the child who comes into and out of the life of your grandchild.

### **How can I deal with the grief and anger that I feel and all that is happening?**

These feelings are pretty universal when adult children cannot or do not parent their own children. But knowledge empowers people to deal with hard situations and move toward some peace and acceptance. Grieve and let your grandchild grieve the situation. You might also want to:

- Talk to a therapist. Therapy has helped many people find satisfying ways to deal with these difficult entangled relationships.
- Read about grief and develop ways of dealing with it in order to find peace and acceptance in your situation.
- And again, one of the most helpful things you can do may be to join grandparent and caregiver support groups.

### **Levels of Care**

In Wisconsin, child welfare agencies are now licensing all qualified relative caregivers as foster parents.

Laws have changed to allow foster parents to be certified at different levels based on their training and experience. Level 1 certification is reserved for “child-specific placements” only. For relative caregivers, this means they are licensed to care for a specific relative, but not any other foster children. There are fewer requirements, and Level 1 foster parents only need 6 hours of training.

All foster parents will also have the opportunity to move up to a Level 2 certification, which offers a higher monthly payment that is based on the age and needs of the child in care. Level 2 providers need an additional 30 hours of pre-service training, as well as 10 hours of training each year.

A copy of the current [DCF 56 Foster Care Licensing code can be found here.](#)

### **How do I handle the financial responsibilities of this new person to support?**

Find out about community resources. Go to the [University of Wisconsin Extension website](#). Badger Care Plus, WIC, Food Share Wisconsin, and Energy Plus are a few of the many resources you may be able to access. This site will tell you where to start.

Tell your employer as soon as you can about your new role raising your grandchild. Find out about insurance changes, and options for scheduling and child care that may be available to you.

### **I have to deal with the courts now. What should I do?**

The court works best when you are involved as much as possible. Go to all the proceedings, even if someone tells you that you don't need to be there. Other things to

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consider:

- Get legal help. If you can't afford it, contact [legal aid services](#) for help. A lawyer can advise you about what documents you need, guide you through the steps and help you implement good plans.
- Speak up at court or submit a letter (to all parties) for the court proceedings. Be objective. Facts, not emotions, will serve you best in court.
- Save all of your notes and documents in special files or boxes.

**I have not been in a school in a long time. What should I do?**

If your grandchild cannot stay in the same school, register your grandchild for school as soon as possible. Explain to the school staff your grandchild now lives with you. Other things that will likely be helpful include:

- Attending conferences, open houses, and school events that involve your grandchild.
- Getting involved. Introduce yourself, and tell staff who your grandchild is. You won't be alone. There will be other caretakers there in your same situation. Join the parents organization or a booster club. Statistics show that kids whose families are involved in school do better.
- Maintaining contact with teachers. Don't wait for them to seek you out. Feel free to call or email them or offer to volunteer in the classroom, if you're able to.
- Sharing some of the family situation, if you're comfortable doing so. This often helps teachers understand your child better.



**My grandchild is so unhappy and struggling with all that has happened. What can I do?**

It's common for kids to show a lot of anger, sadness, depression, and inability to deal with life in a process like this. Every person, child or adult, reacts differently and has to work things out in his or her own way. You can help by:

- Letting them know that you are also sad.
- Not belittling the missing parent.
- Taking your grandchild to a therapist. Most therapists will want to include you at times with your grandchild in therapy so that you can learn more about what you are doing that works and to know what you can change to help your family function with peace.

Since time began, grandparents, relatives, and other concerned adults have raised children when their parents were not able to do so themselves. These precious children have blessed many lives. Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, Colin Powell, and countless others have spent years of their childhood being cared for by grandparents who gave them what they needed to succeed in the world. May your gift of love and sacrifice be honored for that precious child you are now raising.



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## Resources

### *Additional Resources*

- [Wisconsin Family Caregiver Support Helpline](#) (Toll-free at (866)-843-9810)
- [The University of Wisconsin Extension](#)
- [Kids Matter, Inc.](#)
- [Wisconsin DCF Kinship Care Program](#)
- [Understanding the Uniform Foster Care Rate](#)
- [Grandparenting Today Publications](#)
- [Wisconsin Kinship Navigator](#)