Relative Caregiving FAQ

The Changing Role of Grandparents and Other Relatives in Kinship Care

Approximately 2 million family relatives, principally grandparents, become “parents the second time around.” Many people in this situation need answers to concerns they may face, insight into the feelings and experiences of being a parent to a grandchild, and support in finding resources for themselves and the grandchildren in their care. Here we present some commonly asked questions regarding relative caregiving.

Please note that while many of these questions are specific to grandchildren, you are sure to find a common thread in your specific relative caregiving situation. Please keep in mind that the Wisconsin Family Connections Center is here as an ongoing resource for families. We are here to listen, provide support, and connect families to resources in their communities. Your shift in role as a relative caregiver may be challenging, but it is often during our most challenging moments that we learn our true strength.

Question: I haven’t helped with homework in a long time, and things have changed. What can I do to help my grandchildren in school?

First of all, keep in mind that even very young parents struggle with this! Here are a few tips for making homework time less stressful:

- Do homework at the same time each day, whether it's right after school or in the evening. Let the children have some input on choosing what time works best for them.
- If your grandkids need help with an assignment, complete one or two examples together. However, don't help them with every problem. They won't do well on tests and other assignments if they can’t complete the rest of the work independently.
- Help children manage big homework projects by dividing large projects into smaller chunks that can be done over a few days or a week.

Question: I'm raising a teenager now, and it feels like times are so different. How can I learn to understand my teenager better?

It may have been quite a while since you have had an adolescent in your home. A warm, yet firm, parenting style works just as well now as it did in the past. While teens do need independence in decision-making and the freedom earned from trust, they still need to know you are there to listen, provide guidance, and answer their questions. Try to be as open-minded as possible and really listen when they talk. There may be some tough topics, such as sex, drugs, and drinking. It's important that you share your own values and wisdom while making sure these talks don't turn into arguments. Although these conversations can be awkward, the teenagers in your home need to learn from you rather than receive incorrect information from their peers. The good news is that research has shown that teenagers often carry family values into adolescence and adulthood.

Question: My other grandchildren (nieces, nephews, etc.) are jealous. What should I do?

Try to set aside time to spend with children who live outside your home whenever you can. Perhaps you could "swap" a night of babysitting with your grown children or another aunt or uncle. If the other children don't live nearby, give them a phone call, even if it's just a brief conversation. Better yet, send them a text message or email just to let them know you're thinking about them. It may surprise you to know that children still love receiving mail. Send them a card, a note, or other small items to keep your relationship strong.

Question: Sometimes I feel like I wasn't successful in raising the parent of my grandchildren, and that's why they came to live with me. How can I feel confident in raising a second generation?

Relative caregivers often feel responsible for their child's failures and will second-guess their parenting skills, regretting past actions. Please know that parenting is not the only factor influencing adult children's poor choices, which may have led to this situation. Be easy on yourself and keep in mind that placements for children who need foster care are scarce. If there is a relative willing to take on this responsibility, this is certainly considered in the best interest of the child. Find confidence in the fact that social workers are looking for a stable and loving environment, and they trust you to care for your grandchild.

Question: I am often frustrated with the child in my care's parent after they talk with or visit the child. What is the best way to deal with this frustration?

Sometimes you may feel that you are tasked with "picking up the pieces" after a parent visits or calls. Even though your grandchild may have been very excited to talk to mom or dad, there are often behavioral problems following the time they spent together. This is common, and if you work to identify the emotion behind the behavior, it will begin to make sense. The child may feel confused or angry as they are still hoping the parent will change and are wondering why they can't live with them. A child's grief will often display itself in anger, not just tears. That is why therapy is strongly recommended to prepare for parental visits and provide tips to create a safe and loving environment.

Question: I sometimes feel sad and depressed, even though I am really excited to care for my relative child. Is this common?

Rest assured, it's typical to feel a mixture of emotions at this time. A child coming to live with you unplanned usually means that something huge happened with their birth parents. Big changes often signify a loss. It will take time to adjust, and you will feel different day to day. Give yourself permission to experience all these emotions without judgment. You may feel stress, worry, anger, resentment, guilt, and grief alongside the happiness you get from spending time with your grandchild. When you're feeling down, reflect on the love you feel for your grandchildren, the joy you experience in watching them learn and grow, and the relief you feel at providing them with a safe, nurturing, stable environment.

Question: How do I cope with the fact that there are friends and family members who have judged or rejected me based on my decision to raise my grandchildren?

Unfortunately, you may have friends who no longer want to spend time with you due to your decision to raise your grandchildren. You may be feeling rejected and are dealing with yet another loss—the loss of your social network. Remember that support groups are designed to help you cope with this loss. Turn to the grandparents you meet at support groups or online for friendship and encouragement. Alternatively, you may also consider connecting with parents from a younger generation. The shared joys and tribulations of raising children can quickly form common bonds. Parents of similar-aged children can offer camaraderie and help you navigate the maze of issues children face today. And these parents can look to you for your wisdom based on your years of experience.

Question: I am really struggling with being put into a parental role when I really want to be a grandparent. Do you have any advice for me?

As mentioned earlier, raising grandchildren is bound to trigger a range of emotions. It's only natural to feel some ambivalence about child-rearing at a time when you expected your responsibilities to be dwindling. These feelings don't mean that you don't love your grandchildren. Try to recognize the unique relationship you are developing with your grandchild and do your best to enjoy time spent together every day.

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