

Grandparents: As Parents

Fact Sheet No. 10.241

Consumer Series | Family

by R.J. Fetsch and B. Jacobson*
Revised by C.A. Fruhauf**

An increasing number of births to unmarried teen mothers, a high divorce rate, and epidemics of HIV/AIDS, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, and illegal drug use (especially methamphetamine) leave many children orphaned, or with parents unable to care for them.

Some Facts

Census 2000 was the first time that questions on grandparental caregiving were included in the census. Since then, some results from the Pew Research Center, the 2005-2011 American Community Survey, and the 2010 Census indicate:

- In 2011, 7.7 million children in the U.S. were living with a grandparent with nearly 3 million children cared for primarily by grandparents.
- In Colorado, 99,745 (8.2% of children in Colorado) children under the age of 18 lived with grandparents or other relatives. Of these 74,505 (6.1% of children in the state) live only with grandparents.
- The number of grandchildren being raised by grandparents in Colorado increased from 2.6% in 1960 (16,700), to 5.1% in 2000 (55,575), and to 6.1% in 2010 (74,505).
- By ethnic background, nationally 51% of grandparent caregivers are white, 22% are black, 20% are Hispanic, and 3% are Asian.
- Among grandparents raising grandchildren, 55% had done so for three years or more; this is most common among black grandparent caregivers.

*R.J. Fetsch, retired Colorado State University Extension human development and family studies specialist and professor, human development and family studies; and B. Jacobson, retired Extension family and consumer sciences agent, Douglas County.

**C.A. Fruhauf, Colorado State University, associate professor of human development and family studies, and director, HDFS Extension. 2/2014

Grandparents' Role in Divorce and "Kinship Care"

Increasingly, grandparents are playing key roles in divorce involving their adult children, particularly with regard to caring for grandchildren. Whether it be in terms of offering temporary child care, gaining visitation rights after the divorce, or seeking custody over grandchildren who have been abandoned or abused, today's grandparent is more involved in "kinship care" than ever before.

"Kinship care" refers to care provided for children by relatives other than their parents. The increasing involvement of grandparents in "kinship care" is due to three interacting factors:

- the increased responsibilities carried by many grandparents who serve as caregivers of grandchildren during times of family crisis,
- the increasing number of grandparents who are younger and healthier than previous generations of grandparents (conditions that positively affect their ability to care for grandchildren), and
- a growing body of research indicating that there are substantial benefits to children from interaction with grandparents.

When a Single Parent Turns to a Grandparent for Help

Increasingly, after divorce (or death), custodial parents turn to their parents (the child's grandparents) for help. The grandparents' first reaction, usually, is to agree to the parent's request. In so doing, grandparents who take over for parents accept a daunting responsibility.

The following is general advice for these situations:

- In time, grandparents may find they simply cannot look after an active or difficult youngster, or they may come to resent having



Quick Facts

- Today's grandparent is more involved in "kinship care" than ever before. One in ten children were living with a grandparent in 2011.
- When a grandparent fills a parent role, particularly when the parent is present, the lines of family authority tend to become confused in the child's mind.
- Do not attempt to get grandchildren to take sides in their parents' divorce.
- If a recently divorced in-law feels that weekly visits by the former spouse's parents are too difficult to manage for the moment, the grandparents should, in most instances, not argue.
- Parenting a grandchild may require such resources as child-care, insurance, social security benefits, and interactions with other grandparents in similar circumstances.
- For educational information on grandparents raising grandchildren, please examine www.ext.colostate.edu/grg.

© Colorado State University Extension. 1/02. Revised 2/14.
www.ext.colostate.edu



to parent again. In either case, it is best to frankly share and discuss these feelings. Explore options. One alternative is for the grandparent to provide financial support so the parent can afford competent child care.

- When a grandparent fulfills a parent role with regard to a grandchild, particularly when the parent is present, the lines of family authority tend to become blurred and confused in the grandchild's mind. Guidelines for discipline and child rearing strategies ideally should be agreed on by all parties involved.

- Caregiving can be stressful. Grandparents need to have a healthy lifestyle, continue recommended health checks, monitor finances, and connect with others going through similar experiences.

Guidelines for Dealing with Grandchildren after Divorce

- When a couple divorces, a natural tendency of grandparents is to side with their child against his or her spouse. The suggested guideline, however, is to remain (at least outwardly) neutral. It is in the grandchild's best interest to keep matters as amicable as possible.

- Do not attempt to get grandchildren to take sides in their parents' divorce. Sometimes, one or both of the divorcing parents will attempt to use grandparents as a weapon in the struggle for a grandchild's loyalty. These attempts should be resisted, and dealt with in an open manner.

- Stay flexible. If a recently divorced in-law feels that weekly visits by the former spouse's parents are too difficult to manage for the moment, the grandparents should, in most instances, not argue. They should settle for a different—even if less frequent—schedule. Generally, patience will most likely pay off in a better relationship.

Tips for Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

Following are some tips for grandparents to nurture grandchildren in a caregiving role:

- Take care of yourself. If you do not practice good self-care techniques, your health may suffer and you may not be able to meet your grandchild's needs.

- With younger grandchildren, read to them every day.

- Help grandchildren practice safety by providing needed equipment and role-modeling behaviors like always buckling seat belts.

- Keep immunizations up-to-date.

- Provide nutritious foods.

- Set a good example by calmly working out disputes, especially with the grandchild's parents.

- Monitor television, movie, music, and computer use by grandchildren.

- If a grandchild has special needs, seek out services as soon as possible.

- Make it a point to talk with your grandchild's teachers.

- Make the grandchild feel loved and important.

Internet Resources

AARP Grandparent Information Center provides a wide variety of resources for grandparents, as well as technical support materials to community-based groups and service agencies working with grandparents: www.aarp.org/families/grandparents

American Bar Association's Center for Children and Law can provide answers to legal aspects of raising grandchildren: www.abanet.org/child/home.html

The American Self-Help Clearinghouse is a nationwide computerized database that offers tips on how to start your own grandparent self-help group, and a listing of local self-help clearinghouses in your area: www.selfhelpgroups.org

Colorado Legal Services provides legal advice on raising grandchildren, including taxes and health care: www.coloradolegalservices.org/CO/index.cfm

Colorado Office of Resource and Referral Agencies, Inc., provides a comprehensive source to aid in the search for child-care: www.corra.org

The Foundation for Grandparenting has innovative ideas for grandparents as parents and a large selection of books: www.grandparenting.org

Generations United supports children and adults through education, programs, and policy change: <http://gu.org>

Grandparents as Parents helps individuals network with other grandparents: www.grandparentsasparents.org

Grandparents Resource Center works with grandparents and family members to facilitate harmony and foster intergenerational relationships, providing broader security for children in the family: <http://grc4usa.org>

The Grandparent Rights Organization is a grandparenting rights advocacy group: www.grandparentsrights.org

Grandparents Who Care is an organization designed to help grandparents with visitation problems: <http://grandparentswhocare.org>

National Center for Grandparents Raising Grandchildren has a mission to improve the quality of life for intergenerational kinship care families via education, advocacy, and the promotion of sound legislation: <http://wmich.edu/grandparenting/>

References

- Cansfield, J., Hansen, M., McCarty, M., & McCarty, H. (2002). *Chicken soup for the grandparent's soul*. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications.
- Carson, L. (1996). *The essential grandparent*. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications.
- Cox, C. (2000). *Empowering grandparents raising grandchildren*. New York: Springer Publishing.
- Cox, C. (Ed.). (2000). *To grandmother's house we go and stay*. New York: Springer Publishing.
- Elkind, D. (1990). *Grandparenting: Understanding today's children*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman & Co.
- Fay, J., & Cline, F. (1994). *Grandparenting with love and logic*. Golden, CO: The Love and Logic Press.
- Hayslip, B., Jr., & Goldberg, R. (Eds.). (2000). *Grandparents raising grandchildren*. New York: Springer Publishing.
- Hayslip, B., Jr., & Patrick, J. (2003). *Working with custodial grandparents*. New York: Springer Publishing.
- Hayslip, B., Jr., & Smith, G. C. (2013). *Resilient grandparent caregivers: A*

- strengths-based perspective. New York: Routledge.
- Kornhaber, A. (2002). The grandparent's guide. New York: Contemporary Books.
- Kornhaber, A. (2004). The grandparent solution. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Parent Place. (2001). Going to grandma's house...to live. Springfield, IL: The Parent Place.
- Strom, R., & Strom, S. (1991). Becoming a better grandparent. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.