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## HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

# Grandparents as Caregivers: Common Questions

Human Development and Family Studies Extension

**M**ost grandparents don't expect to take on the role of caregiver for their grandchildren — and they usually fill this role longer than expected. About half of grandparents who care for their grandchildren do it for two years or less, while about 40 percent fill this role for five years or more. This trend may sound overwhelming, but grandparents report less parenting stress, fewer health problems and less emotional strain the longer they care for their grandchildren. The following questions and answers may be useful if you find yourself as the guardian of your grandchildren.

**My young grandchildren recently moved in with me. They don't say much about how they feel — how can I tell if they feel stressed or anxious?**

Children exhibit stress in different ways. Some children react to stress physically. They may experience sleep disruptions, nightmares, stomachaches or fatigue. They may also be more sensitive — crying or feeling afraid and clingy. Some children may express anxiety or stress by being aggressive or disruptive at school. They may easily



get angry or irritated. It's important to watch for any behavior that is unusual for the child.

**Where can I find help caring for my grandchildren? I really need a break.**

Many grandparents rely on extended family for help, and turn first to a daughter. Ask your adult children to watch their nephews or nieces occasionally. You can also offer to watch their children in exchange for them watching the grandchildren in your care — giving everyone a much-needed break! Your parents, if in good health, can also be helpful. Outside of family support, public schools often offer after-school programs with recreational activities, homework help and mentoring. You can also contact your local

Boys and Girls Club, YMCA or 4-H clubs. Most of these programs have only minimal fees.

**I feel so stressed. Does this mean I'm too old to be caring for my grandchildren?**

All major life changes — positive or negative — are stressful. This stress is compounded when life changes come without warning or against your wishes. It's normal to feel shaken up. Try these strategies to reduce your stress. Join a support group for grandparent caregivers, where you'll find people who are likely to understand how you feel. These groups are a place to share information and advice, as well as support. Some groups arrange social and recreational activities for your new family to participate in together. You can find a support group through senior citizens centers, University of Missouri Extension centers and community agencies serving older adults. At home, develop a routine with your grandchildren. A predictable daily schedule builds security for children and cuts down on household chaos. This is especially beneficial for children who have come from an unstable home. Finally, be gentle on yourself. Try not

to hold yourself to the same standards that you did before your grandchildren moved in. Some days, the house will be messy, the beds unmade and dirty dishes left in the sink for a few hours. Do not worry. Sometimes, you need to take time to relax and share special moments with your grandchildren when they need you.

## Sometimes I feel angry and frustrated — I’m raising young children when I thought I would be enjoying leisure time at this point in my life.

### Am I selfish?

It's okay to feel angry or frustrated with your new parenting role; many grandparents in this role share your feelings. This is especially true for those whose own children are grown. It is disappointing to cancel, or put on hold, plans that you had for retirement. It may even cause tension in your relationship. Some grandparents feel selfish or ashamed for wanting a little "alone time." Just sharing these frustrations with others who understand can make you feel better. It's important to find a confidant and put a support system in place. Many grandmothers confide in their grown daughters (other than the mother of the grandchildren in their care). You can also try a grandparent support group, where grandparents in similar situations provide understanding, information and support. Grandparents who join a support group report feeling better about adjusting back into a parenting role. You can find a support group through senior citizens centers, University of Missouri Extension centers and community agencies serving older adults. Finally, it's critical that you share these (very normal!) feelings with someone other than your

grandchildren. You never want your grandchildren to feel like they are a burden to you.

## Since our grandchildren moved into our home, my spouse has become moody and irritable. We seem to be arguing more. Why is he being so difficult when our grandchildren need us?

Many couples experience strain on their relationship and report less satisfaction with their marriage when grandchildren move into their home. Care giving presents a lot of changes and challenges. First, taking in grandchildren can disrupt your plans for your retirement. Many couples anticipate retirement as a time when they're finished raising children — a time to focus on their relationship and doing fun things as a couple. Grandparent caregivers also report that raising their grandchildren leaves less time and attention for their partners. Your husband may feel ignored and miss time with you. It's difficult to give adequate time and attention to everyone in your family. But do not be discouraged. You may also see positive changes in your marriage as well. Engage your husband in caring for your grandchildren and their daily lives. This new role may bring the two of you closer, giving you more to share and talk about. Life is busy, but find time every day for some one-on-one time with your husband. A few minutes over coffee can be enough time to talk and support one another.

*This guide was written by Teresa Cooney, associate professor, Human Development and Family Studies, University of Missouri.*

## My grandchildren are difficult to manage and don't listen to me. Spanking doesn't seem to work. What should I do?

Defiant behavior is not unusual for children whose primary caregivers are not their parents. This behavior may be a reaction to their prior home environment. Spanking is not an effective form of discipline because it does not teach children self-control or alternative positive behavior. Not only does spanking become less effective over time, it has negative side effects. Children may see themselves as a victim or someone who deserves to be hurt. Children who have been removed from their parents' care because of neglect or abuse may be especially sensitive to spanking. Spanking is associated with elevated aggressiveness and defiance in children. So, try more positive forms of discipline.

## What forms of discipline are most effective for children?

There are several forms of positive discipline that are appropriate for even toddlers and preschoolers. First, set clear rules for your grandchildren before you are confronted with unacceptable behavior. For example, tell children, "We don't write on walls." Then follow with a positive alternative. For example, "Sheets of poster paper or your notebook are great for drawing and coloring." Also remember that some misbehavior is simply a child's natural curiosity. You can prevent mischief or a potentially dangerous situation by childproofing your home. Don't wait for your grandchild to put an object into an electrical outlet — childproof your home to prevent situations in which you have to discipline your grandchild

for naturally curious behavior. When children are misbehaving, remove them from the situation. For example, if your grandchild is fighting with another child, take him or her to a spot to play alone. This calms the situation. While moving the child, you don't need to say much. Let the child play alone until he or she calms down. Another technique is to distract the child with an alternative activity or remove the object that is causing problems.

Present logical and meaningful consequences for misbehavior. If your grandchild is throwing sand at another child at the park, say, "If you cannot stop throwing sand, we will go home and we will not visit the park tomorrow." If your grandchild is throwing food at the table, you might say, "You can either stop throwing food or you'll have to leave the table and finish your meal alone in the kitchen." Never use consequences that you are not willing to enforce. Do not say, "We'll never come to the park again." Instead, try, "We'll need to leave the next time you do that. We won't come to play group with your friends next week." In sum, consistently enforce rules that are clear and consequences that are logical.

It's important to praise your grandchild's positive behavior too. Saying thank you or good job makes children feel good about themselves. Most likely you'll see less misbehavior as your grandchildren strive to please you.

## My teenage daughter recently had a baby, and they both live at home with us. What role should I take in caring for her baby?

There are several roles you can play, depending on what you and your daughter both want. Some grandpar-

ents assume primary responsibility for their grandchild if their daughter is particularly young and still in school. This amount of support will allow her to finish her education. Grandparents in this role tend to believe that their daughter will assume parenting responsibilities when she is older and more prepared.

Other grandparents share parenting with their daughter. This may allow your teenager to go to school and work — something critical to teenage development. However, this takes some coordination of schedules to avoid conflict and confusion when it comes to who is responsible for what tasks and at what time.

Another alternative is to support your teen in her role as the primary caregiver for her baby. In this case, you provide guidance in parenting. As you support your daughter in learning about parenting, your involvement will decrease as she develops skills and confidence. However, this may make it difficult for your daughter to complete her education and find some free time to do activities that typical teenagers enjoy.

## My children are upset with me since I took in their sister's children, my grandchildren. Sometimes they seem jealous, and I don't know why or what I can do about it.

Many grandparents find that their other children become jealous when they decide to care for their grandchildren. There are several reasons they may feel upset or jealous. It's likely that you have less time and attention for them. They may also feel that the grandchildren in your care receive more material resources from you. Your children's jealousy may actually be

concern for the new stress and challenges you face in your new parenting role. They may actually be worried about you and how you will deal with your new responsibilities.

Perhaps you can relieve their concern by inviting them over to share quality time together. Your other grandchildren may enjoy visiting even more since they now have built-in playmates (their cousins). Consider a sleepover or celebrating a special occasion all together. Talk openly with your children about your concern for your grandchildren's care and safety. Reassure them that you would do exactly the same for them and their children if they were in need.

## My school-aged grandchildren moved in with me because their parents are coping with a drug addiction. How can I help them with their feelings of shame and embarrassment?

Children may feel ashamed and even guilty about a parent's undesirable behavior. They may also feel bad about themselves. This is especially the case when others, including classmates and family members, talk negatively about the situation. You can help build their self-esteem and reduce their negative feelings by consistently reassuring them of your care and love. Pay special attention to what makes them feel good, such as birthday celebrations, school activities and accomplishments (even minor ones). This will also build their self-worth. While you can not control how others behave or what they talk about, ask family members and friends to refrain from talking negatively about your grandchildren's parent. Reassure your grandchildren

that their parent is a good person who got involved in some bad behavior. Tell them that, hopefully, their parent is (or plans on) getting help for those issues.

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