

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren



Raising a second generation brings many rewards but it also comes with many challenges. Taking them into your home requires major adjustments but with the right guidelines and support you can make a real difference in the lives of your grandchildren.

Here are some tips to make this transition easier:

Acknowledge your feelings

Positive emotions such as love, joy and relief at giving your grandchildren a stable environment are easy to acknowledge. How about the overwhelming feelings of stress and worry by being a full-time caregiver? You may feel anger, resentment toward the grandchildren's parents for leaving you with the responsibility of caring for their children or you may feel guilty and responsible for your child's failures as a parent. You may also be grieving the loss of your independence.

Take care of yourself

Being the full-time caregiver to your grandchildren comes with physical, emotional and financial demands that will make you feel overwhelmed. As a result, it is critical that you take care of yourself and get the support you need. Eat nutritious meals, exercise, get adequate sleep and don't let doctor's appointments or medication refills slide. Carving out time for relaxation and hobbies is essential to avoid burnout and depression and don't forget to lean on your "older" grandchildren for help. Kids are smart and very capable. Even younger children can pick up after themselves and help out around the house.

Concrete support

Research shows that grandparents who cope well with the added stress of raising grandchildren are those who seek out support in times of need. Find someone you can talk to about what you are going through, to work through your feelings instead of ignoring them. Seek out support groups, starting at your local senior center. These groups can be very helpful and a good start to make friends "walking in your shoes". Reach out in your community for childcare help through faith-based organizations or social service agencies, story-time hours at the local library, or asking your neighbors about a babysitting swap or having their teen help out.

Dealing with your grandchildren's feelings

Moving to a new home is not easy, especially if children are losing regular contact with their parents. It will take time for them to adjust and they may act out to cope with the emotional neglect and trauma they experienced. Children may resent being separated from their parents and wish to return regardless of the situation. Don't take this personally because even if they are old enough to understand that they are better off with you, they will still miss their parents and struggle with the feelings of abandonment. They may withdraw, lash out inappropriately and show aggressive behavior or they may push you away. Remember, they need your comfort and support at all times.

Focus on creating a safe environment

There are things you can do to make the transition easier such as establishing routines. Routines and schedules for mealtime and bedtime help a child feel safe. Encourage their input by allowing them to decorate their new room and arrange things as they'd like. Set up clear, age-appropriate house rules and enforce them consistently because children feel more secure when they know what to expect. Offer your time and attention at the beginning of the day, when they come home from school and before bed.

Open and honest communication

Communicating openly and honestly with your grandchildren about their situation is the most important thing. Plan regular times when you sit and talk to each other and encourage them to speak about their feelings. Help them learn to identify their emotions. When deciding what to tell your grandchildren, you need to consider their age and development. Avoid telling the child too much since some of them are too young to understand the whole story. Never lie to a child and avoid telling the child too little or nothing at all. Children are smart and if they learn something from somebody else about their situation, they could feel hurt and be confused.

Encourage contact with parents

If it's possible for a child to remain in contact with the parents, please help make visits with parents as smooth as possible. Don't put your grandchild in the middle, communicate clearly and cooperate with the parent. Making these visits a routine will help reduce stress since they know what to expect. Remember to be sensitive to your grandchild's feelings and help them deal with disappointments if the visits don't go well.

Resource information

The American Association for Retired People (AARP) has a wealth of resources available including grandparent support groups, information about Medicaid and Food Stamps, and a service for AARP members to find easy access to attorneys across the country. www.aarp.org

The Children's Defense Fund has a kinship care resource kit for grandparents raising grandchildren. Go to: www.childrensdefense.org and in the search area, type in kinship care resource kit.

A grandparent in a kinship caregivers program, Brenda Barnes, has a great blog with some useful tips and information at: <http://recycledmomsraisinggrandchildren.com/>.



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