

## Grandparents and Grandchildren Together

As adults, we are often called upon to care for children in our families. If you are one of those dedicated family members, you probably notice that children and youth today are growing up in a rather different world than we did. You also notice that you may have a different level of energy, physical abilities, and personal needs than you did when you were younger. Adapting to youngsters in a different generation than ours is a challenge, no question about it! However, no matter how much you can or cannot physically do, you are very important in their lives. If you have no children in your life right now, you undoubtedly know people who are stepping up to the plate to nurture children in their families. What are their joys and struggles? How can we support them in raising these children to healthy adulthood?

Being an occasional or *traditional* grandparent or relative caregiver can be a satisfying, if sometimes stressful, experience. At the end of a visit, the children go back to their own homes and the house is quiet again. However, parenting again full-time, or *custodial* caregiving, is a complex undertaking. Parents struggling with stress overload or other overwhelming circumstances frequently ask grandparents or other relatives to take some degree of responsibility for their children. Grandparents or relatives often volunteer to keep the children when parents clearly are not capable of caring for them. Occasionally, social services or the courts request that relatives play the parenting role.

### Goals of this program

- 1) Raise awareness and appreciation of grandparents and other relatives raising children full-time in your community.
- 2) Identify ways to support grandparents and other relatives in their critically important roles.

The children will benefit greatly all their lives. Please note that, in this publication, the word *grandparent* will include other relatives who care for children full-time.

### Contents of the program

This program includes eight fact sheets that describe various aspects of custodial grandparenting. You may want to use the fact sheets yourself or pass them along to custodial grandparents in your community.

### Facts about Kentucky Grandparents and Other Relatives

According to an AARP fact sheet and the 2000 U.S. Census, in Kentucky:

- 57,141 children live in grandparent-headed households (5.7 percent of all the children in the state). There are another 12,294 children living in households headed by other relatives (1.2 percent of all the children in the state). Of the children living in households headed by grandparents in Kentucky, 30,241, or about 44 percent are living there without either parent present.
- Fifteen percent of Kentucky grandparents responsible for children living with them are African American. One percent is Hispanic/Latino. Eighty-two percent are White. Seventy-four percent are under the age of 60. Twenty-two percent live in poverty.

## **Immediate Sources of Assistance and Support in Kentucky**

To find immediate help and support for raising a child unexpectedly, contact your local family resource center in a public elementary school if the child is in fifth grade or younger. Get in touch with a youth services center in middle school or high school if the child is enrolled at one of those levels. Your county Extension agent for family and consumer sciences knows how to contact the family and youth services centers in your community.

## **Grandparents are Essential**

Your importance to your grandchildren cannot be overstated. Parents may work long hours to make ends meet. Without extended family members helping out, parents often rely on fast food restaurants rather than home cooked meals. Families may be too hurried and harried to listen carefully to each other's ideas and concerns. Misunderstandings and resentments may build to the boiling point. In addition, parents may become unable to care for their children due to illness, substance abuse, financial pressures, incarceration, or other problems. Grandparents may step in with partial or full-time assistance. With their support, children can be nurtured to a healthy adulthood.

Typically, parents are the most powerful and beloved people in a child's universe. However, children generally view their grandparents as wise and special—a parent's parent. So, as a caring grandparent, you command their full respect. You can play an active nurturing role in the lives of children in your family even if you live a distance away from them. Electronic media and the telephone now make communication easy.

## **Roles Grandparents Play**

**Protector:** Grandparents may be protectors of the rights of a sister or brother against older, more powerful siblings. They may speak out to rescue a child from a bully at school or day care. They soothe the hurt of defeat. They comfort when grief and loss overwhelm a child's world.

**Role model:** Grandparents are role models. Children and youth observe grandparents closely for examples of manners, language, sense of responsibility, and wisdom. They make children's lives richer with their life stories.

**Teacher:** Grandparents teach skills that children usually do not learn in classrooms. Children learn by watching and doing to build, bake, sew, or garden. Research tells us that learning by doing is the best method to cement lifelong skills, values, and family traditions in the brain.

**Play partner:** Grandparents frequently have time to play games and read stories, bake cookies, sew doll clothes, build a tree house, or take walks. They enjoy cheering children on during sports and performances. Grandparents usually find joy, fun, and fulfillment in these activities.

**Caregiver:** As mentioned above, grandparents may be traditional caregivers. They may come to visit for very special periods of time. They may care for grandchildren at certain times of the day or week while parents work, go out for dinner and a movie, take a class, or attend a meeting. They may care for grandchildren every day, all day, or after school. Then there are those courageous grandparents who care for their grandchildren full-time, taking the role of parents. Custodial grandparenting is challenging and complex.

**Thinking points for you:** If you are a grandparent or a relative in contact with children, what roles do you play? Are there other roles you can think of besides those listed here? What kinds of play activities do you enjoy most? How do you feel about being a traditional or custodial grandparent?

What situations bother or upset you? What assistance from the community would be helpful to you? You may want to discuss these questions with others.

### **Explore Your Family History with Your Grandchild**

Research tells us it is important for grandparents to explore their family history with children. Doing so helps children gain a sense of family unity and belonging. They may feel more closely connected to real family members of past generations. The following information suggests ways to explore your family story.

**Thinking points for you:** Have you ever wondered what your great-great-grandfather did for a living or where you got the nose that you have? Where did your relatives come from? Why did they settle where they did? With a little investigation, you may answer these or similar questions. In the process you and your grandchild could have a wonderful time discovering your family history.

### **Start Searching with What You Have**

So where do you start? Each of us likely has a bit of family history right at home. Pull out those boxes that are tucked away in closets. Here are a few things to look for:

- Family documents such as medical records, school records, or legal records
- Photo albums, letters, newspaper clippings, birth announcements, wedding invitations
- If your photos aren't labeled, you may want to ask other relatives or longtime friends what they know about the pictures.
- Old books, family mementos, or antique items

Another place to look is at relatives' homes. You can photocopy many documents and then return them to their owners. Family recipes, favorite stories, and family traditions are just a few things you can gain from visiting with extended family members. Write down or tape record these chats as they recall experiences. Here are some questions to get you started. For example:

- Where did you meet your spouse? What attracted you to him or her?
- What was it like to live during a historical event such as \_\_\_\_\_?
- What do you remember about your parents or grandparents?
- How were things different?
- What holiday traditions did you have?

There are other places to explore your family history. Check the family Bible or other important books for old clippings or written notations. Visit the family cemetery to do tombstone rubbings. Go to the county clerk's office to check wedding dates or land purchases. Churches often maintain marriage and baptismal records. The Internet is also a great source for family history information.

### **Organize**

Now that you have gathered this information, it is time to get organized! To be effective you must sort and store your items and notes in a consistent and meaningful way. Some families sort by individual. Others sort by dates or by family era. Still others may sort by record type. For example, they may keep school records together or photos together. Think carefully about how you'll organize your information so you can easily find things.

**Thinking point for you:** What ideas or insights do you have for organizing your family history?

### **Celebrate!**

To receive the full benefits of exploring your family history, you also need to find ways to celebrate and showcase it. Here are a few suggestions:

- Frame pictures of your grandparents and display them in your home.

- Make family scrapbooks with your grandchildren.
- Display tools that were owned by your father or grandfather in a shadow box (a set of hanging shelves with sections).
- Hang up quilts or needlework made by your grandmother or other relative.

For children, treasures of the past open the door to conversations and stories that link them to their heritage and help them understand the values and traditions of your family. Try to think of other ways to prominently display your family history and family links to the past. Above all, have fun with the process of discovering and celebrating family stories!

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