



No. 11 in the Series

THE ART OF GRANDPARENTING

A grandparent's life journey often takes an unplanned detour when they become a parent to a grandchild. This may occur due to the premature death of a child's parent, a parent's incarceration, the occurrence of mental health or substance abuse concerns, or for other reasons.

Millions of family relatives, particularly grandparents, become "parents the second time around" when parents experience difficulties and children need care. Grandparents in this situation need answers regarding concerns they may face, insight into feelings and experiences in their role as parent to a grandchild, and support in finding sources of strength for themselves and the grandchildren in their care.

# When Grandparents Become Parents to Their Grandchildren

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## Some Facts on Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

In the United States, more than 6.5 million grandparents lived with at least one grandchild under age 18 in the same household by the year 2024. About one in 12 American children (a total of 5.8 million children) was living in a household with at least one grandparent.

Such family settings may range from multiple generations sharing a home together to a widowed grandmother raising a granddaughter. In particular, however, an estimated 2 million grandparents carried the primary responsibility of caring for their grandchildren and meeting their basic needs, representing nearly 31% of grandparents who reside with a grandchild (data from 2024 American Community Survey).

These families headed by a grandparent often are called "grandfamilies," and they are common among families in which a relative has taken over primary responsibility for raising a child from parents (known as "kinship care"). **Relative caregivers**, such as grandparents, are adult relatives in a family who have taken on the primary role of providing care and guidance for a related child who is age 18 or younger.

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North Dakota State University, Fargo, North Dakota

## Reflection Activity – Grandparenting Scenarios

List two or three thoughts and feelings that you think would be common for a grandparent in each of these different grandparenting scenarios.

**Scenario One** – A grandmother receives a phone call from the hospital. Her first grandchild, a granddaughter, has been born to a son and his wife. She gets ready to travel to visit the grandchild and family. What are her thoughts and feelings?

- *(Example) I am excited to hold a newborn grandchild for the first time.*

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**Scenario Two** – A grandmother receives a phone call from a social worker. Her oldest grandchild, 11 years old, is in need of care. The child's parents are divorced; her father is incarcerated in another state, and her mother has been arrested on drug charges. The social worker wants to visit about providing kinship care. The grandmother gets ready to visit with the social worker and get her home ready for the grandchild. What are her thoughts and feelings?

- *(Example) Where is my grandchild's school? What time does it start? Can I do this?*

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## Potential Reasons a Child is Cared for by a Grandparent

The reasons a grandparent may provide needed care for a grandchild vary and can include:

- ▶ Parent has an addiction or difficulties with alcohol or drugs
- ▶ Parent has mental health challenges or emotional problems
- ▶ Child neglect, abandonment or abuse
- ▶ Parent is in jail
- ▶ Youth or inexperience of parents (teen pregnancy, etc.)
- ▶ Physical health issues or death of parent
- ▶ Unstable home life, homelessness
- ▶ Lack of financial resources, lack of general ability
- ▶ Domestic violence in the home, divorce, other family challenges
- ▶ Military deployment

Each family is unique, and grandparents assume caregiving roles for many different reasons.

## Raising a Child as a Grandparent

Clearly, grandparents often are very influential in the lives of grandchildren, whether they provide occasional care, live close by or are far away. But what happens when grandparents assume the role of parent for their grandchildren? Becoming a parent to a grandchild means taking on an important new role in life. Several important factors can include:

- ▶ **Attitude adjustment** – Grandparents usually anticipate later life as a time to enjoy the privileges of grandchildren without many responsibilities. Adjusting to the new role of primary caregiver typically takes some effort. Also, it may mean many adjustments in life planning, from finances to career changes to location and lifestyle changes.
- ▶ **Mixed feelings** – Most adults enjoy being grandparents and associating with grandchildren. However, taking on the role of raising a grandchild can bring mixed feelings because grandparents feel increased anxiety and pressure while also appreciating closeness to a grandchild.
- ▶ **Sense of purpose** – Grandparents involved in raising grandchildren often report a greater sense of purpose in their own lives. While the change may not be expected, most grandparents raising grandchildren describe a greater sense of purpose in life *because of their caretaking responsibility*.
- ▶ **Heightened stress** – Raising children brings with it common stresses, from meeting basic needs to making sure homework gets done. Often, grandparents raising a grandchild experience significantly more stress than other caregivers due to such things as financial concerns, physical limitations or adjusting to transitions. Grandparents in this role need support in caring for their own physical and emotional health.
- ▶ **Need for support** – The support needs of grandparents raising grandchildren often increase. Providing for education costs, medical needs of children, discipline and guidance, and other tasks requires support and encouragement from others.

# Varied Roles as a Grandparent

Research with grandparents who are “providing regular care” to grandchildren shows a variety of roles. Seventeen percent (17%) of grandparents responsible for grandchildren have been so for less than a year, a fifth (19%) for one or two years, and nearly two-thirds (65%) of grandparents have been providing care to grandchildren for three or more years. Three common roles identified for grandparents providing care to grandchildren are:

- ▶ **Day-care grandparents**, who provide regular daily care for an extended period
- ▶ **“Living-with” grandparents**, who reside with a grandchild but do not have legal custody (usually the grandchild lives in the grandparent’s home)
- ▶ **Custodial grandparents**, who have obtained legal responsibility for the grandchild

Grandparents more often provide regular care for a daughter’s child than a son’s, especially in the custodial situation. Day-care grandparents usually care for very young children, while other grandparents care for children up through the late teenage years.

All three groups reported that rearing young children affected their lifestyle, friendships, family and marriage. Nearly three-fourths of all the grandparents reported major adjustments in their routines and plans, with custodial grandparents reporting the most change.

Despite challenges, most grandparents raising grandchildren are very committed to providing care and finding the resources needed to give children a loving, safe environment.

## Grandparents Raising Grandchildren – North Dakota (2024)

### The Children

In North Dakota, **7,433** children under age 18 live in homes in which the householders are grandparents (4.2% of the children in the state). (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024 American Community Survey)

### The Grandparents

In North Dakota, **4,458** grandparents are the householders and are responsible for their grandchildren living with them.

Among these grandparents:

**62%** are white and not Hispanic, **27%** are American Indian and Alaska Native, and **11%** are of other ethnic or racial backgrounds.

**42%** have no parents of the children in the home.

**18%** live in poverty.

## Grandparents Giving Support to Grandchildren

The demands placed on grandparents providing regular care to grandchildren can vary widely. Economic hardship in the U.S. and recent social challenges have contributed to the increase in multiple-family generations living together to save costs and share resources.

For day-care grandparents, their assistance is usually given to offset economic difficulties and provide support for working parents. Parents with full-time work schedules may depend heavily on grandparents to provide needed supervision and care. Parent illness, divorce, teen parenthood or simply a desire to help adult children and grandchildren can all be motivating reasons for a grandparent's assistance in such circumstances.



“Living-with” grandparents is also quite common, with multiple generations living together in a single household. In this situation, grandparents most often provide help with financial difficulties and work to provide basic needs and save economic resources. An adult child may have lost a job, experienced a costly divorce or been reduced to part-time work, and therefore, family members live together to meet economic or other needs.

“Living-with” grandparents, however, are more often in a position in which they simply begin to take over responsibilities for raising a child. In some cases, this pattern may develop because the child's mother has not yet left home.

In this circumstance, the grandparents do not have legal authority over the grandchild, but often “living-with” grandparents prefer such an informal arrangement. Obtaining legal custody sometimes can involve declaring one's own adult child an unfit parent, which takes an emotional as well as financial toll.

Custodial grandparents who are providing primary care and have legal responsibility for a child often become involved due to significant stresses, such as a parent's mental or emotional health concerns, physical illness or death, substance abuse difficulties or parental incarceration. These grandparents play an important role in caring for children, with their own unique needs and strengths, and they also benefit from specific support as a family unit.

Most of the time, grandparents in this situation did not plan to assume care of a grandchild (some of whom have their own frustrations and challenges) at a time when they are experiencing the processes associated with growing older.

# Support Needs for Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

Regardless of a caregiver's age, race or ethnicity, gender, living situation or economic status, all grandparents raising a child and other relative caregivers share a common need: *the need for education and support*. They need to understand the specific issues surrounding their situation, knowledge of best parenting and guidance practices, and support to provide the care a child needs.

Grandparents raising grandchildren can benefit from extra support and encouragement that other family members provide. In addition, they may benefit from connecting to available social service agencies and support organizations in their region.

A variety of support options are available. Some health-care and nonprofit organizations (such as the statewide Parent Education Network in North Dakota) offer grandparenting classes to address the changing roles of grandparents. Other options might include caregiver support groups and resources from organizations focused on serving families and seniors. Call around in your community and contact your local county or regional Extension office to see what is available.

Support for adults providing kinship care to a child can address many needs:

- ▶ Assistance in establishing legal guardianship, if needed
- ▶ Financial assistance through welfare (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families), Medicaid, etc.
- ▶ Assistance with housing or energy costs
- ▶ Setting up educational funds and assistance with school enrollment
- ▶ Respite care and other services for care providers
- ▶ Counseling or other assistance for children who have experienced trauma or who have behavioral issues
- ▶ Education on caregiver support efforts and programs

Eligibility for some kinds of assistance may be dependent on the grandparent's legal relationship to and responsibility for the child, which is covered in greater detail in the NDSU Extension publication, "The Rights of Grandparents in Raising Grandchildren."

Support groups and services for grandparents raising grandchildren are also springing up around the country. Caregiver support groups can provide discussion and support networks, linkage with specific resources and association with community partners.

Some groups support educational efforts, such as the Parenting A Second Time Around (PASTA) curriculum, which provides education on a wide range of issues affecting grandparent caregivers. In North Dakota specifically, the North Dakota Family Caregiver Support Program provides information, assistance, counseling, support groups, training, respite care and supplemental services to grandparents who are caring for children. Resources are identified below.

## Support and Services to Caregivers – North Dakota

### North Dakota Family Caregiver Support Program

NDDHHS

Aging Services Division

ND Aging and Disability Resource-LINK  
1(855) 462-5465

Email: [carechoice@nd.gov](mailto:carechoice@nd.gov)

<https://ndcarechoice.hhs.nd.gov>

(This program provides information, assistance, counseling, support groups, training, respite care and supplemental services to grandparents who are caring for children).

### North Dakota Parent Education Network

[www.ag.ndsu.edu/pen](http://www.ag.ndsu.edu/pen)

### AASK (Adults Adopting Special Kids)

<http://aasknd.org/>

AASK is North Dakota's program providing adoption services to children in foster care and the families who adopt them. It is a collaborative effort of Catholic Charities North Dakota and other partners under contracts with the North Dakota Department of Human Services.

## Conclusion

Grandparents are very important and influential people to grandchildren of all ages. If you are a grandparent raising a grandchild, you may need to work at defining your new role and establishing a positive relationship with your grandchild. The circumstances that put you in this position have a big impact on how your role develops. Keep in mind that the child is not responsible for the situation and should not be put in a position of being blamed or shamed.

You have an exciting opportunity to guide your grandchild toward becoming the responsible adult you envision. For more information on the role of grandparents, ask to see other publications in this series.

## Recommended Resources

### **Family and Relationships resource page, American Association of Retired Persons**

The Family and Relationships resource page on the AARP website offers ideas, articles and discussion groups for a variety of family and grandparenting issues.

<https://www.aarp.org/family-relationships/>

### **Child Welfare League of America**

Phone: (202) 688-4200 <https://www.cwla.org/>

### **Generations United – National Center on Grandfamilies**

Grandfamilies Resource page

<https://www.gu.org/explore-our-topics/grandfamilies/>

### **Grandfamilies.org**

A national legal resource in support of grandfamilies.

<https://www.grandfamilies.org/>

### **HelpGuide on Grandparents Raising Grandchildren**

A guide on navigating the varied challenges of raising grandchildren.

<https://www.helpguide.org/family/parenting/grandparents-raising-grandchildren>

### **National Community Reinvestment Coalition – Resources for Grandparents Raising Grandchildren**

<https://ncrc.org/resources-for-grandparents-raising-grandchildren/>

### **Zero to Three – The Grand Connector: Grandparent Resources**

A resource listing with specific resources for grandparents as caregivers.

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/for-families/grandparents/>

## Other North Dakota Resources

### **Legal Services of North Dakota (LSND)**

Provides legal advice and representation to disadvantaged older adults in areas of civil law.

Call 1-866-621-9886 or visit <https://lsnd.org/>.

### **NDC3**

A resource for registering in health and well-being programs in ND, including programs on family caregiving and managing chronic health conditions. Visit <https://ndc3.org/>.

### **NDSU Extension – Aging Well**

Provides science-based resources on various topics, including family caregiving and well-being in older age. Visit <https://www.ndsu.edu/agriculture/extension/extension-topics/family/aging-well>

### **ND TANF Kinship Care Program**

Financial help for kinship caregivers facing unexpected costs. Visit [www.hhs.nd.gov/applyforhelp/tanf](http://www.hhs.nd.gov/applyforhelp/tanf)

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For more in The Art of Grandparenting series, please visit [www.ndsu.edu/agriculture/extension/extension-topics/family](http://www.ndsu.edu/agriculture/extension/extension-topics/family)

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