

## Understanding Emotional Issues in Your Grandchildren's Lives



### Key Words

grandparents raising grandchildren, behavioral and emotional problems\*, grief and loss\*, fears\*, embarrassment\*, anger\*, (\*in grandchildren being raised by grandparents)

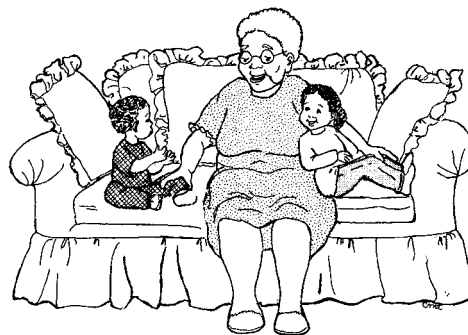
Families headed by grandparents are an increasing presence in American society. U.S. Census figures (2003) reveal that more than six million children are living in households headed by grandparents or other close relatives. Nearly 5.8 million grandparents are living in homes with one or more of their own grandchildren under the age of 18. More than 2.4 million of these grandparents have primary responsibility for meeting their grandchildren's basic needs. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003)

There are many compounding issues contributing to the rise in custodial grandparent households. These include substance abuse, physical or mental illness, divorce, blended family complications, incarceration, military duty, unemployment or job relocations, poverty, and abuse and neglect. (DeToledo & Brown, 1995; Generations United Fact Sheet, 2002; Smith, Dannison & Vacha-Haase, 1998) Caregiving grandparents find themselves facing multiple, unique challenges on a daily basis. Limited time, social isolation, work-related challenges, lack of access to medical, educational or legal services, financial stresses and difficult family relationships all contribute to the daily stresses encountered by many custodial grandparents. (Dannison & Smith, 2003; Smith & Dannison, 2002)

Children in the care of grandparents differ from those in parent-maintained homes in a number of ways. Casper and Bryson's (1998) study of American grandparent-headed families concluded that children are more likely to be younger, have household heads who are older and less likely to be employed, to live in the South or in central cities, and to be poor.

Additionally, custodial grandchildren are more likely to live with a caregiver who has not graduated from high school. Over 30% live with grandparents who have not completed high school compared to 12% of children in parent-maintained homes. (Casper & Bryson, 1998)

Children in grandparent-headed homes may present multiple needs due to both congenital and environmental factors. They are more likely to have experienced prenatal drug and/or alcohol exposure and may have difficulties forming attachments. (Minkler & Roe, 1993; Smith, Dannison & Vacha-Haase, 1998; Smith & Dannison, 2003) Grandchildren may also experience physical, emotional and/or cognitive deficits which can negatively impact development. Research shows that grandparented children experience higher levels of behavioral and emotional problems when compared to children living with their parents. Nearly 30% of children in grandparent-headed homes exhibit learning difficulties and/or mental impairment and over 60% repeat at least one grade in school. (Sawyer & Dubowitz, 1994)



Children in the care of grandparents may come to their current living situations from diverse circumstances, but most share a lack of consistency in their early lives. Discipline may have been inconsistent and inappropriate, meals may often have been sporadic, and daily schedules left to chance. These factors contributed to the conflicting emotions experienced by many grandparented children.

These may include:

**Grief and Loss:** Children in the care of grandparents are struggling to adapt to the dual losses in their lives. They have not only lost a parent but have also lost a “traditional” grandparent. Custodial grandparents must often change their roles as they begin to assume responsibility for their grandchildren’s daily care. Grandchildren may find it difficult to give up their special relationships with “grandma” or “grandpa” as he or she becomes the primary caregiver.

**Guilt:** Custodial grandchildren may feel high levels of guilt. They may view their parents’ absence as proof that they “didn’t measure up” or had misbehaved in some way. Children may verbalize that they wish they were smarter, prettier, or hadn’t hit their brother so that their mom or dad would still be living with them. Children from poor early home environments may feel additional guilt as they realize they really like their new living situation.

**Fear:** The many inconsistencies in early interactions, combined with an abrupt change in living situations, contributes to feelings of fear in many grandparented children. They may have never had the experience to allow them to effectively bond with a consistent adult caregiver. Some grandparented children are unable to form relationships and can not maintain reciprocal interactions. Others become inappropriately attached to the grandparent or older sibling. They may have extreme difficulties separating from their trusted caregiver and are fearful about reaching out to others.

**Embarrassment:** Children in grandparent-headed homes may feel exposed and sensitive about their family’s composition. Comments and questions from other children may be difficult for them to manage. Grandparents will look different than other kids’ parents or clothing or social schedules won’t match with their peers’ and can further intensify children’s feelings of embarrassment and not belonging.

**Anger:** Children living with grandparents have often experienced major changes in their lives and usually have had little control over contributing circumstances. This

feeling of a lack of control over their lives often intensifies their feelings of rage. Episodes of angry behavior may take many forms including threats, destructive behaviors and violence toward self or others.

Custodial grandparents need to maintain a consistent and nurturing environment for the children in their care.

- Providing predictability within the home environment will help increase children’s feelings of security and personal worth.
- Grandparents can also enhance children’s feelings of self-worth by communicating their caring and confidence in the child’s abilities to act out their conflicting emotions in appropriate ways.
- Providing acceptable outlets for emotional expression is necessary and actually modeling appropriate behaviors may be helpful. For example, a grandparent may show an angry child that kicking a ball, pounding clay, or retreating to a quiet place to look at books are all appropriate strategies for dealing with anger.
- Grandchildren will also need reassurance that everyone feels sad, guilty, or angry at times and that these are acceptable emotions that need appropriate outlets.
- Finally, grandparents need to be alert to frequent and/or extreme emotional outbursts and be ready to seek professional help from a teacher, school counselor, or mental health worker.



The chart *Common Emotions and Strategies*, M&M p. 28, summarizes common emotions for custodial grandchildren and provides a few suggested strategies for grandparents.

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# Common Emotions and Strategies

<b>Grief &amp; Loss</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Verbally acknowledge child's losses. Discuss changes in child's life and what they've had to "leave behind."</li> <li>Take photos of child in his/her new environment (custodial grandchildren may have little documentation of their early years). Display on a bulletin board or collage.</li> <li>Read the story <i>Boomer's Big Day</i> by Constance McGeorge. Cut out a paper suitcase. Assist grandchild in locating pictures in magazines or newspapers of items they would choose to take with them if moving. "Fill" the suitcase by pasting magazine pictures inside.</li> </ul>
<b>Guilt</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide many opportunities each day to enhance child's self-esteem. Allow them to "help" as frequently as possible and reinforce their efforts.</li> <li>Read the story <i>Jamaica's Find</i> by Juanita Havill. Allow grandchildren to dictate their own story if desired.</li> <li>Praise child consistently for even small, positive gains. Keep feedback genuine but look for opportunities to "catch" child in desired behaviors.</li> <li>Discuss the concept that everyone makes mistakes. Brainstorm ways to apologize/make things right again when mistakes occur.</li> </ul>
<b>Fear</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide consistency in both caregivers and environment.</li> <li>Establish routines for separation. Read Audrey Penn's <i>The Kissing Hand</i>.</li> <li>Reinforce "brave behaviors." Start a sticker chart and provide stickers for each brave behavior displayed. Remember, for a fearful child, a "brave" behavior may be something as simple as smiling at a friend or not crying when separating from grandma.</li> <li>Many children are frightened of being alone in the dark. Purchase a small flashlight and allow grandchild to decorate it. Keep the flashlight next to (or in!) his/her bed each night.</li> </ul>
<b>Embarrassment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assist the grandchild in developing answers to questions that other children or adults may ask about their home life.</li> <li>Be alert to ways that you can assist your grandchild in "fitting in." Search out what afterschool options (i.e., sport teams, scouts, musical groups, etc.) are available and popular with other children.</li> <li>Talk to other caregivers about clothing and activities.</li> <li>Read <i>The Ugly Duckling</i> by Hans Christian Anderson or <i>Elmer the Elephant</i> by David McKee. Discuss how animals and people can be "different" and "special." Assist grandchild in making list or collage that depicts their own uniqueness.</li> <li>Share a humorous and embarrassing moment or two from your own life. Focus on how you were able to laugh about this situation at a later time. Discuss what you learned about yourself.</li> </ul>
<b>Anger</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Look for opportunities to model appropriate expressions of anger. Identify the feeling and show how it can be managed correctly. For example, "I'm really angry that I broke this bowl. I'm going to go away by myself for a few minutes until I calm down. Then I'll come back and pick up the broken pieces."</li> <li>Provide a variety of outlets for expressing anger. Options include pounding clay or pillows, finger painting to wild music, running in place, taking ten deep breaths or listening to quiet music.</li> <li>Read <i>Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day</i> by Judith Viorst. Laugh about Alexander's many troubles and discuss how the next day will be different for him.</li> <li>Prevent angry feelings from building up by insuring that grandchildren get some exercise (preferably outdoors) each and every day. Go for a walk, visit a playground, dance to wild music, or kick a soccer ball. Fifteen minutes of exercise each day will go a long way toward preventing angry outbursts in many young children.</li> </ul>