

Finding resources is key to success for grandparents raising grandchildren

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by Eileen Beal

The 2000 census takers asked Americans who was taking care of the nation's children, and the answer they sent back to Washington was a shocker. “The census showed that one in 12 kids in the US was being raised in the household of a relative other than a parent,” said Mary McNamara, coordinator of the Care and Caregiving Center at Fairhill Center in Cleveland .

In Ohio , that translates to nearly 193,000 kids—most of whose parents can't care for them due to substance abuse, mental illness, or incarceration—being raised by a relative. About 80% of them—almost 157,000—are being raised, full- or part-time, by a grandparent. (Note: Numbers data from AARP-Brookdale Foundation study).

The “average” grandparent caring for grandchildren is a single woman between 41 and 60. “She is usually caring for two or three children under the age of 13, and is still working,” said Bernardine Brooks, manager of the Cuyahoga County Department of Senior and Adult Services' community programs division.

How do these middle-aged and older women feel about becoming second-time-around parents?

Their feelings are mixed, said both McNamara and Brooks. They are glad they are able to step in and help and they get much joy and satisfaction from doing it, said both McNamara and Brooks. But they are stressed out, anxious, angry, and depressed, too. “The vast majority are totally unprepared for the issues that they are facing...[and] they feel overwhelmed.”

Chief among those “issues:”

- finding social services—“One of the biggest criticisms that [grandparents] have of the social services system is how difficult it is to access services and maneuver through the system,” said Brooks.
- finding legal advice and information—“ [M]any don't even realize that they need to have legal custody of the child until there is a medical emergency or they try to enroll them in school,” said Brooks.
- finding a way to deal with increased financial responsibilities—“Many grandparents are on fixed incomes. It's not uncommon for them to skip buying medications because they are buying things for their grandkids,” said McNamara.

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- finding emotional support—“There is a lot of stress and some depression when [grandparents] take on the role of parent,” said McNamara. “When they network in support groups, they find out about community resources and what others are doing in the same situation. That helps them ‘normalize’ things...[and] release some of the shame and guilt.”

Compounding these problems is the fact that most second-time-around parents are still working. “That adds stress because they have to juggle work and the childcare responsibilities they have taken on,” said McNamara.

Also, they often face the prospect of losing their housing. “When the family composition changes, they are often harassed to move out,” said McNamara.

Empowerment—finding and using the right resources—is the key to successful grandparenting, said both McNamara and Brooks, and there are a variety of resources available to hook second-time-arounders up with the resources they need.

The best place to begin a search for local resources is the Cuyahoga County Department of Senior and Adult Service's Grandparent/Kinship Caregiver Program (216-420-6772). Among the services it offers: help finding social services in every municipality in the county; free legal services; free child care (respite care); and grandparents-as-parents (GAP) support groups.

Other good places to begin a search include:

Bellflower Center 's Kinship Care Program (216-229-2420)

Fairhill Center 's Kinship Care Program/Kinship Care Resource Library (216) 421-1350.

Web Sites

AARP's Grandparent Information Center www.AARP.org/grandparents

Child Welfare League www.cwla.org/programs/kinship

Children's Defense Fund's Kinship Care Program www.childrensdefense.org

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren www.state.oh.us/age/grandparents.pdf

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Ohio State University Extension Service <http://sandusky.osu.edu/gparent/gparent.htm>

Books

Empowering Grandparents Raising Grandchildren, Carole B. Cox

Raising Our Children's Children, Deborah Doucette-Dudman

Relatives Raising Children, Marianne Takas

Second Time Around, Joan Callandar

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