



Grandparents as Parents: An Emotional Roller Coaster

Grief, shame, love, fear, resentment, anger, and guilt are just some of the feelings that fuel the varied emotional states of parenting for a second generation. The rapid shifts of emotion can be just like a roller coaster. Routines are disrupted, and most grandparents feel unstable.

In their book, *Grandparents as Parents: A Survival Guide for Raising a Second Family*, Sylvie de Toledo and Deborah Edler Brown address the emotional roller coaster and other concerns of grandparents who are parenting grandchildren.

The availability of resources and support will help to determine the depth of the despair that may result from the emotional roller coaster. A single grandparent often has more difficulty in dealing with the ups and downs of second parenthood than a married couple, who can rely on each other to assume some of the responsibilities.

Whether you are a double or single grandparent stepping in as parent, it is important to examine your feelings and deal with the issues they represent. An array of emotions is perfectly normal.

Isolation

Isolation is a common theme in the conversations of most grandparents serving as parents.

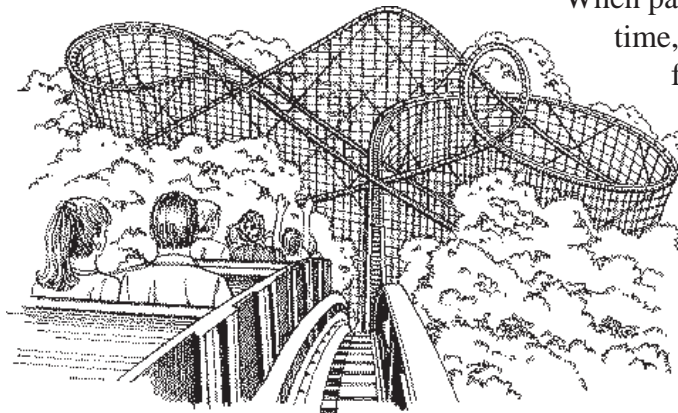
When parenting for the second time, many grandparents often feel alone. Grandparents as parents may feel alienated from extended family members and friends. They may sense that their grandchildren are not welcome at social events designed for senior adults, and they may

feel equally out of place at events designed for younger adults with small children. The best solution to the problem of isolation is the support of other people. Seek out support through groups and one-on-one relationships.

Grief

Loss is synonymous with the grandparent-as-parent experience. Grandparents may feel the loss that comes from the death of their own child or the loss that comes from realizing that for some reason their adult child cannot parent. Grandparents may feel cheated out of the grandparent role when they must assume the role of parent.

Accompanying the sense of loss is the experience of grief. It is easier to discuss grief



when an adult child has died. However, grandparents who have lost a child to drugs or mental illness continually move from grief to hope and back again. Grandparents as parents may also grieve the loss of freedom they planned to have in their middle or retirement years. Counseling or bereavement groups can often help those dealing with a loss. Grief is a process with different stages, and it is necessary to allow yourself to grieve.

Anger and Guilt

Anger, resulting from frustration with the situation, and guilt are familiar dual emotions for second-time parents. The anger may be felt and expressed toward your adult child, with the aftermath usually being guilt for feeling and expressing your anger.

Experts declare that it is okay to feel angry. Your life has been disrupted, and resentment is normal. We must, however, learn to defuse the anger. Learning to cope is the key to successful anger management.

Fear

Grandparents parenting grandchildren often live in fear. They may fear the legal and Social

Service systems that could place their grandchildren in foster care, fear that the parents will resurface before they are capable of parenting their children, fear they will not have the physical stamina or financial resources to meet the demands of second-time child rearing, and fear that the grandchildren are emotionally scarred from the ordeal. These fears are real and possible, but living in fear is debilitating. Living without fear is a challenge for everyone.

The fears, verbalized sometimes as “what-if” scenarios, can overwhelm almost anyone. Refuse to let fear be victorious.

Doubt

Doubt is often a product of fear and is a very normal reaction for many grandparents raising grandchildren. Understanding that doubt is a normal reaction may help you cope.

How to Cope

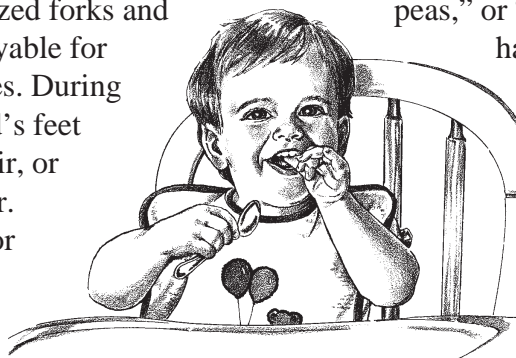
Accepting the responsibility for raising grandchildren brings incredible change and challenge to life. As you endeavor to meet the challenge, Sylvie de Toledo and Deborah Elder Brown make these suggestions:

- *Prioritize.* Decide what is most important, and handle that first.

From Fingers to Forks

When helping your grandchild learn how to eat, remember that broad-based cups with large handles are easier for small hands to hold. Small glasses, half full, also help. Plates with rims help children push food onto their forks and spoons. Also, child-sized forks and spoons make it more enjoyable for children to feed themselves. During mealtime, your grandchild’s feet should rest on a floor, chair, or step—not dangle in midair. Comfort is as important for youngsters as it is for adults.

Preschoolers eat more slowly than adults. Remember to consider the extra time they need to eat. Allow about 30 minutes for a meal, then remove the food, and



do not serve any more food until the next meal or planned snack. Don’t take away favorite foods to punish your grandchild or use food as a reward for good behavior. Never say things like, “You don’t get dessert unless you eat your peas,” or “If you’re a good boy you can have a cookie.” This teaches

your grandchild that sweets are better than other foods.

If you use common sense and plan your meals around the Food Guide Pyramid, your grandchildren should become good eaters. The eating habits children

develop in the first four or five years of life will influence the rest of their lives. Help your grandchild get off to a good start.

- *Take one thing at a time.* Remember that “by the mile is a trial but by the inch is a cinch.”
- *Take time for yourself.* You will need to refuel.
- *Don't do a job better than needs to be done.* Try lowering your standards to lighten your load.
- *Set limits with your grandchildren.* Rules, such as a regular bedtime, ultimately help everyone cope.
- *Seek help.* Help may come from friends, family members, organized support groups, and the religious community. Help and support are a fundamental part of the coping process. Isolation is an enemy to the coping process.
- *Let yourself off the hook.* Adults are responsible for their choices. Release yourself from feeling responsible for any poor choices made by your adult children.
- *Focus on the positive.* Keep in mind why you have disrupted your life. Focus on the rewards. There will be moments of joy and times of satisfaction.

(“An Emotional Roller Coaster” was adapted from *Grandparents as Parents: A Survival Guide for Raising a Second Family* by Sylvie de Toledo and Deborah Edler Brown. Sylvie de Toledo is a licensed clinical social worker, founder of the organization “Grandparents as Parents,” and co-president of the National Coalition of Grandparents. Deborah Elder Brown is a well-published free-lance writer.)

Six Ways to Help Grandchildren Feel and Act Better

1. *Every child needs attention.* Maybe your grandchildren, when living with their parents, could only get attention by misbehaving. By giving attention to positive behavior, you can show them there's another way.
2. *Misbehaving may be a cry for help.* Children who've been hurt need structure and rules, applied with love, to help them get back on track. As you give them the love and structure they



See the Glass Half Full

Individual and family counselors and others who are knowledgeable about human behavior confirm what common sense tells us—a positive, appreciative attitude is basic to good mental health and all-around success.

Our attitude also can affect our physical health. Those who keep their sunny sides up and see the glass as half full rather than half empty are more than perpetual optimists. They may also be in considerably better health than their gloomier friends and coworkers.

Convincing evidence for this viewpoint comes from a series of studies that examined a large number of business executives and lawyers. Those individuals with a hardy, positive attitude, and who looked upon stressful situations as challenges and opportunities, stayed physically and emotionally healthier and were more successful than others who faced similar circumstances.

Research on elite athletes also found that a positive, optimistic outlook is basic to their success.

need, they may begin to behave more appropriately.

3. *Your grandchildren may be expressing the anger they feel at all they've been through.* It's a way of saying, “I deserve better.” The anger is healthy, but it's coming out the wrong way. You can help them learn to express their anger in a safer, more positive way.
4. *There may be physical reasons.* For example, if a mother takes drugs or drinks alcohol while pregnant, the baby may be affected. The effects on the child, which include behavior, may last into adulthood. Good medical care won't make the problems disappear, but it can help.
5. *Misbehaving in school could be related to learning problems.* No child wants to look or feel “stupid,” so some act tough or play the class clown. You can work with the schools to help your grandchildren do their best. Praise the children for their efforts and talents.

6. *Children learn by example.* If your grandchildren have seen fighting and poor self-control, it's no wonder that they've learned to fight and have poor self-control. You can show your grandchildren a better example.

(Adapted from *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren* by Marianne Takas, 1995, Brookdale Foundation.)

The Three A's

Attitude, acceptance, and appreciation.

Without question, these are three of the most important ingredients in the success of family life. The three A's are skills that can be learned and continually strengthened. Keep in mind that they are contagious, so practice them often.

Attitude. This involves the choice to view life in a positive way, the willingness to see things through another person's eyes, the courage to face and solve conflicts, the humility to make mistakes and learn from them, the vision to say "we can do it," and the ability to find opportunities even in the midst of difficulties.

Did You Know?

- Most people become grandparents between the ages of 49 and 53 and may spend as many as 30–40 years in that role.
- Problems facing grandparents raising grandchildren were a major concern at the 1995 White House Conference on Aging. The U.S. Congress also designated 1995 as the Year of the Grandparent. Nationwide, there is greater understanding of the significant role many grandparents play in raising their grandchildren.
- The U.S. Census Bureau reports that six million of America's 72 million children live with grandparents.
- African-American film maker Spike Lee was raised by his grandmother. He notes that much of his success is rooted in his grandmother's caring and support.

For inspiration . . .

Whether you think you can or whether you think you can't, you're right.

Henry Ford

Acceptance. This is a decision to accept and love family members as they are, to accept and love yourself just as you are now, to accept circumstances you don't like but for now are unable to change, to accept the inevitable ups and downs of life, to open to the inner peace that dwells within each of us, and to accept the many opportunities for growth and enjoyment that surround us.

Appreciation. This includes a sincere smile, a pat on the back, a "thank you," a word of encouragement, an unexpected gift or favor, a hug, a hand to hold—these are the daily building blocks that form strong relationships and build healthy self-concepts. In thoughts, words, and actions, make a habit of saying to family members, "I appreciate you." Focus on their personal strengths, their successes, and the good feelings you have about them. Expressed appreciation is love made visible.

See the Texas AgriLife Extension Service Grandparents Raising Grandkids website for more information:

<http://grandparentsraisinggrandkids.tamu.edu>

Permission was granted by Dr. Sam Quick, Human Development and Family Relations Specialist, Kentucky Cooperative Extension, to adapt this material for use by the Texas AgriLife Extension Service. Adapted by Dr. Judith L. Warren, Gerontology Specialist; and Dr. Dorothy James, Family Life Specialist (retired), Family Development and Resource Management, Texas AgriLife Extension Service, The Texas A&M System, College Station, Texas.

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