



Grandparents as Parents: Support Groups Ease the Journey

In the past decade, support groups among grandparents serving as parents have been of great value. Support groups function as “extended families” in giving support, operating on the simple premise that helping someone else makes us feel better. When we feel better, we can cope better.

Support groups offer emotional support and advice on how to deal with common problems. Members can talk about their problems without embarrassment, give support and encouragement to each other, share coping strategies, release feelings such as anger and guilt, make new friends, and help deal with feelings of social isolation.

Grandparents raising grandchildren live with hectic schedules that sap their energy. They must also deal with guilt and resentment—their own, their children’s, and/or their grandchildren’s. While their friends are taking trips, going out to dinner, or seeing a movie, these grandparents are trapped at home. The added responsibility of raising their grandchildren leaves the grandparents emotionally and financially drained.

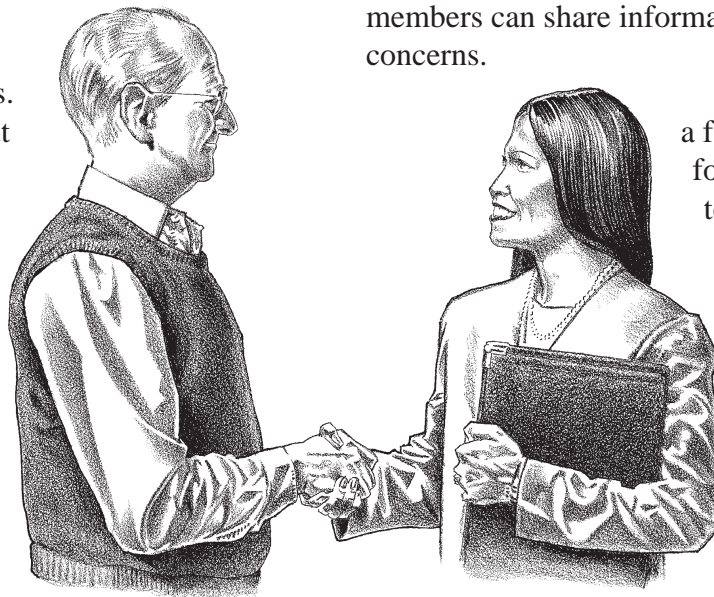
In response to the many pressures grandparents face, hundreds of support groups around the country offer help coping with the problems of raising grandchildren. They give ideas for coping with the challenges grandparents are struggling to overcome.

The goal of a support group is to create a warm, non-judgmental atmosphere where members can share information and discuss concerns.

A support group is a fallout shelter, a place for people to come together when everything seems to be exploding around them. It helps people to overcome feelings of loneliness and isolation. The people there understand what you are going

through because they have been in the same situation, or they face the same problems.

Members of a support group can also be a source of information, supplying such things as information on Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Medicaid benefits for grandchildren, and names of attorneys and social workers who can provide assistance in obtaining legal custody. A support group says, “You are not alone—there are others like you.”



There are many kinds of grandparent groups. Some focus on psychological or emotional issues, some on legal issues/political action, some on basic needs (food, clothing, shelter), and some on combinations of the three.

It is important to understand what a support group is and isn't. Support groups are not psychotherapy groups. They are not led by professional therapists. There is no fee, and you do not have to be an active participant or attend regularly.

Listen

When I ask you to listen to me and you start giving advice, you have not done what I asked.

When I ask you to listen to me and you begin to tell me why I shouldn't feel that way, you are trampling on my feelings.

When I ask you to listen to me and you feel you have to do something to solve my problems, you have failed me, strange as that may seem.

Listen! All I asked, was that you listen. Not talk or do—just hear me.

Advice is cheap: 10 cents will get you both Dear Abby and Billy Graham in the same newspaper.

And I can do for myself; I'm not helpless. Maybe discouraged and faltering, but not helpless.

When you do something for me that I can and need to do for myself, you contribute to my fear and weakness.

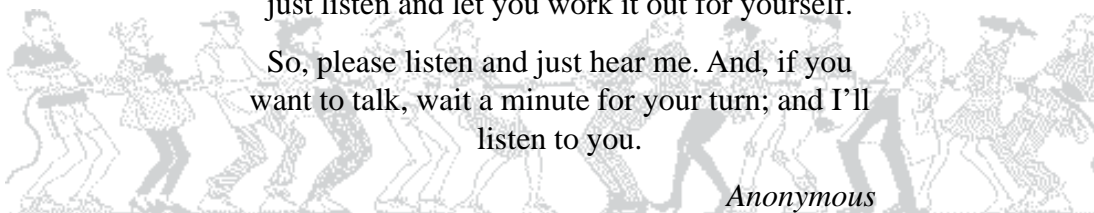
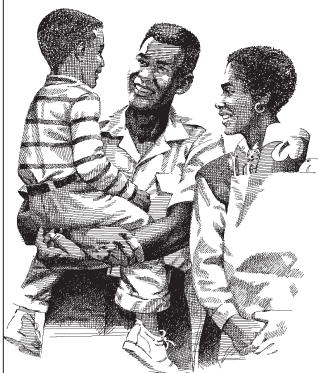
But, when you accept as a simple fact that I do feel what I feel, no matter how irrational, then I can quit trying to convince you and can get about the business of understanding what's behind this irrational feeling. And when that's clear, the answers are obvious, and I don't need advice.

Irrational feelings make sense when we understand what's behind them.

Perhaps that's why prayer works, sometimes, for some people because God is mute, and he doesn't give advice or try to fix things. "They" just listen and let you work it out for yourself.

So, please listen and just hear me. And, if you want to talk, wait a minute for your turn; and I'll listen to you.

Anonymous



Groups have a natural life span. A certain amount of nurturing is needed to keep a group active. If attendance drops off, it may be due to a lack of transportation or child care.

Be aware if the focus of the group is changing or it doesn't meet the needs of most of the members. If the group dwindles or disbands, it may be a sign that the group has been successful and no longer needs to exist. Hopefully, support will continue among the members on a one-to-one basis.

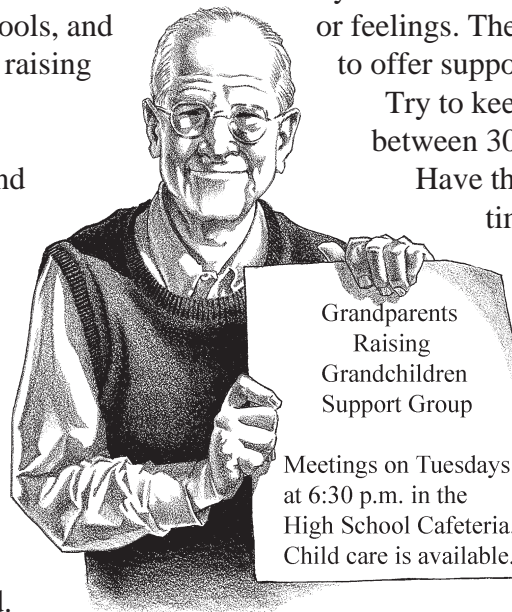
Grandparents face many joys and challenges in raising their grandchildren, but being part of a support group makes grandparents aware that they are not alone in their efforts, and there are other people out there who know exactly what they are going through. Support groups are people helping each other meet the daily challenges in their lives.

Primary Goals of a Support Group

- Promote fellowship, and dispel the sense of isolation.
- Give support and encouragement to others.
- Share coping strategies.
- Release negative feelings.
- Strengthen self esteem.
- Concentrate on abilities, not disabilities.
- Exchange ideas and resources.
- Make new friends.

How to Start a Support Group

1. *Target the specific population.* Contact the family resource center at local schools, and get the names of any grandparents raising grandchildren. Social workers at hospitals, people working in the juvenile court system, churches, and word-of-mouth are also excellent means of finding potential members. If your sources are unable to give you these names, then prepare a letter and/or a flyer with your name, phone number, and other pertinent information. Ask that the letter be sent and/or post the flyers in schools, grocery stores, pediatric offices, or any place grandparents might be found.



For inspiration . . .

If you want to succeed, consult three old people.

Chinese proverb

2. *Select a meeting place.* Find a place to meet that will be accessible to as many grandparents as possible. If you anticipate the need for child care, try to have a separate room available. Children may not understand or might misinterpret things they hear. County Extension centers, schools, churches, hospitals, a YMCA/YWCA, or community centers are ideal places to contact for a meeting room.
3. *Getting started.* When you have a list of potential members and a meeting place, you should contact the grandparents by phone or in person to determine the day of the week and time of day that most grandparents could attend a meeting. Once that has been decided, let each person know when and where the meeting will be held. A personal reminder helps to keep interest high.
4. *First meeting.* The first meeting should be a time of fellowship, planning, and getting acquainted. It is nice, but not necessary, to serve refreshments. It is an expense the group may not wish to incur.

Inform the group that everything shared during meetings will remain confidential, and they do not have to share private details or feelings. The purpose of the group is to offer support to each other.

Try to keep the length of meetings between 30 minutes to two hours.

Have the group decide on the time and place of the next meeting, the topic and format, and if they want a speaker.

Remember, you can't please everyone all of the time.

5. *Participation.* It is important that everyone participate. Some people are not

as verbal as others, and it is difficult for them to share opinions, feelings, or problems until they feel accepted and safe. Members of a group benefit from each other's experiences, and it's important to share positive as well as negative experiences. Members can learn from both.

6. *Topics for future meetings.* Topics could include: legal issues, such as custody, and legislation that is either on the books or pending; financial benefits available, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and Social Security; discipline at home and in the schools; medical resources, such as Medicaid; and emotions, such as stress, guilt, and resentment.

7. *Support systems.* Some grandparents will not attend meetings but will respond to a one-on-one situation. Phone networks can provide support to members whenever needed. Members who are willing to have their names and phone numbers on a list should state specifically what time they are available. Remind everyone to be considerate of each others' time constraints.



These are just suggestions for starting a support group. If you feel strongly about the need for a support group for grandparents raising grandchildren and cannot find one that meets your needs, then start one!

Suggested Meeting Topics

- The financial strain of raising a grandchild
- How your life is different from that of your children's
- Anger at your grandchild, the system, and the situation
- Guilt and depression
- Changes in child-rearing techniques since you brought up your own children
- Dealing with the school system
- Learning to accept the fact that your son or daughter is choosing to be an irresponsible parent
- The effects of second parenthood on your marriage
- How to negotiate the bureaucracy of government agencies
- What groups can do to change the system

Adapted from *Grandparents as Parents: A Survival Guide for Raising a Second Family* by Sylvia de Toledo and Deborah Elder Brown.

Finding a Group

To find a local support group for grandparents raising grandchildren, call your local county Extension office, the Grandparent Information Center, or visit <http://grandparentsraisinggrandkids.tamu.edu>. They have a listing of groups around the state, and more groups are added all of the time.

They can also put you on their newsletter mailing list, send helpful booklets, help you start a new group, or help you find other services you need.

To reach the AARP Grandparent Information Center, call (202) 434-2296 weekdays from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., CST.

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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