



## Grandparents as Parents: Helping a Child Who Has Suffered Neglect or Abuse

Although you may be parenting your grandchildren by choice, more often than not, grandparents become caregivers of grandchildren because the parents are unwilling or unable to care for them any longer due to physical disability, substance abuse, incarceration, or death.

The children may have come to your home after experiencing neglect, abandonment, violence, or abuse. Not only do you have to cope with the physical demands and the financial obligations of everyday care, but you may also have to help them cope with these past abuses.

Child abuse and neglect can result in permanent physical, emotional, and mental damage, and in its most severe form, even death.

Every 21 minutes, a child is abused—down the street, next door, or across the hall from where you live. If you suspect your grandchild, or any child, is being abused, you have an obligation to that child to report the abuse. Federal and state laws require that you report any suspected child abuse. Callers may remain anonymous. Report abuse to your local police department or Child Protective Services office.

### Family Violence

Family violence is the mistreatment of one family member by another. Examples include:

- Physical mistreatment—slapping, hitting, whipping, or burning;

- Emotional abuse—threats, insults, harassment, name calling, and not talking for long periods of time;
- Neglect—inadequate physical or emotional care; and
- Sexual abuse—inappropriate touching, undressing, rape, or incest.

Family violence tends to be a vicious circle. A husband who abuses his wife may also abuse his children. An abused wife may take out frustrations on her children. Children who are abused may abuse siblings, who, without help, may grow up to abuse their own families.

Child abuse may be the result of parental immaturity, unreasonable expectations by

parents who do not understand a child's capabilities and limitations, lack of parenting knowledge, or economic hardship. An adult who does not understand a child's needs may feel inadequate and guilty. They may take these frustrations out on the child.

Abusive parents are not monsters. Typically, they are under great stress. They usually do love their children, but they need compassion and a helping hand to break the cycle of abuse. In the meantime, their children need protection. You, as the grandparent may be the best person to give that protection. Your home may be the only safe, secure environment that your grandchildren may have.



## Violence and a Child's Development

Children growing up with violence are developmentally at risk. For infants, learning to trust is a primary developmental task during the first year of life. Trust is the foundation for further development and the basis for self confidence and self esteem. Violence lessens the likelihood that an infant's needs for nurturing, safety, and stimulation are met so trust can develop.

Developmentally, toddlers have an inner push to try their new skills of walking, talking, jumping, and climbing. Young children in violent families may have restrictions that hamper their activities.

Preschoolers are ready to venture outside the family to form new relationships and learn about people. In a violent environment, these interactions may not be positive.

School-age developmental tasks include building social and academic skills necessary to be successful as an adult. The impact of violence on the development of these skills includes:

- The presence of danger and fear drains energies so that a child has difficulty learning in school.
- The anger caused by being a victim or seeing others victimized makes it difficult for children to control their behavior. This increases their risk of resorting to violent behavior.
- Children learn social skills by identifying with adults in their lives. They cannot learn

nonaggressive behaviors when their models use physical force to solve problems.

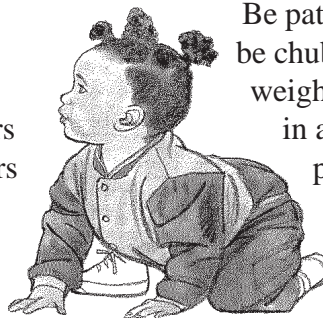
- To control fears, a child who lives with violence may repress feelings. This repression can interfere with the child's ability to relate to others and to feel empathy. Without empathy, an individual is less likely to curb aggression and more likely to become insensitive to brutality.
- Children traumatized by violence may have difficulty seeing a decent future for themselves. Therefore, they may not see the value of learning in school or becoming socialized.
- Children who live with violence learn that they have little control over what happens to them. They may then develop a sense of helplessness rather than autonomy.
- When children experience a trauma, a common reaction is to regress to an earlier stage of development when things were easier. When children face the continual stress of violence, they are in danger of remaining psychologically in an earlier stage of development.

Some children are more resilient to violence than others. Not all children respond the same way. Factors that influence coping abilities include age, family reaction to stress, and temperament. Children can overcome the hurts and fears of earlier times.

## Children and Weight

Children grow at very different rates. They grow rapidly in the first year of life, and weight usually doubles in the first six months. By 14 months, most infants have tripled their birth weight. Growth then slows down. Just before puberty, children experience a second rapid growth spurt. This spurt usually begins at about eight to 10 years of age for girls and at about 11–13 years for boys.

Growth in height and weight do not happen simultaneously. Children may start to look chubby or chunky because they have put on weight but have not grown taller. Some children may look like



string beans because they have grown taller but not heavier. Parts of the body grow at different rates. For example, a child may go through several shoe sizes within months.

Be patient. A grandchild who appears to be chubby may grow into his or her weight. A tall, skinny child may fill out in a matter of months. Health care professionals can help grandparents assess children's growth. If a professional concludes that growth in height cannot possibly take care of a weight problem, he or she will recommend a course of action.

For children living with violence, the ability to have relationships and get from others what they may miss in their own homes is crucial to healthy development. Grandparents can help alter a child's perceptions as well as teach skills for getting along in the world. With time, effort, and skill, caregivers can provide children an opportunity to overcome the odds.

### **Children Are Victims, Too**

Violence is a learned behavior. Children who grow up in violent homes learn that violence is an acceptable way to handle conflict. They don't learn about healthy relationships between men and women, about managing their feelings, or about solving problems in a positive way.

Domestic violence can play havoc with a child's mental, emotional, and physical development. Watching and listening to abusive parents leaves emotional scars. These include low self esteem, mixed feelings toward parents, lack of trust, anxiety while anticipating the next outbreak of violence, guilt and depression due to feeling responsible for the abuse, and fear of abandonment.

Children who are abused may fail to thrive physically or may have speech and hearing problems. They often suffer from stress-related illnesses, such as headaches and stomachaches.

Children from violent homes may be aggressive or extremely passive. Girls often assume a maternal role in caring for the other children. A boy may take on the role of the father as the mother becomes more dependent on him.

These children often experience problems in school, such as failing grades, truancy, or dropping out. They also have a higher rate of juvenile delinquency and substance abuse. Teenagers often escape violent homes by marrying early or by becoming pregnant.

### **When Violence Occurs**

If an incident of violence occurs or violent threats are made while the children are living with you, call the police or an abuse crisis line. Law enforcement officers may arrest the person who is acting violent.

As the grandparent, you not only must provide general care and nurturing, but you may also

have to deal with an angry grandchild who acts in an aggressive manner or a grandchild who is withdrawn or pulls back from your attention.

Be confident. In time you can cope with extremes in behavior brought on as a result of family violence, neglect, abandonment, or abuse. Always remember, you are trying to do what you think is best for the child. Be hopeful that the children will be resilient and can overcome past abuse to become happy, secure, well-adjusted young people.

### **Surviving as a Grandparent**

When the parent is no longer in the family, it may feel to the grandchildren as if the family is no longer a family. Keep reminding your grandchildren you all are still a family—just different than you were before. For everyone's sake, continue to do family things together. Develop new traditions for your second family.

Discipline is very difficult for grandparents. Who wants to be the "bad guy"? Try your best to be consistent, firm, and loving in your discipline. Ask for help when you need it.

It may seem impossible to find time to help with homework and the many activities in which your grandchildren are involved. Set up a schedule, and set priorities—some plans may have to be canceled.

Remember, your grandchildren are individuals. There may be times that you see a resemblance to their parent by the child's actions or appearance, which can cause you to be angry or in pain. Don't forget that all children are special and need to be accepted for themselves.

Sometimes your grandchildren's deep needs seem impossible to fill. Communicate with them. Help guide them, and suggest options for them. Remember, as much as you would like, you cannot solve all their problems or fill all their needs.

### *For inspiration . . .*

No matter what the question, love is the answer. No matter what the pain or illness, love is the answer. No matter what the loss, love is the answer. No matter what the fear, love is the answer.

*Gerald Jampolsky & Diane Cirincione*

Get involved with a supportive group of friends. Being around positive people who can relate to what you are going through can help you cope. This also gives you the opportunity to share your thoughts and concerns with someone and get another opinion.

Take time out for yourself. It is important that you be able to do some things just for you. Having time for yourself will give you the strength to make those decisions that are not

always easy to make and give you more energy to keep up with all the responsibilities that come to grandparents raising their grandchildren.

No one said being a grandparent was an easy job—and being a grandparent raising a grandchild can be an even tougher one. You may feel better about your situation when you see progress. As the children in your care do better, you'll feel pride and relief.

## Sources of Help

There are many sources of help for troubled families. Look in the Yellow Pages under “Children,” “Social Service Organizations,” or “Crisis Intervention.”

If you suspect a problem, seek help right away. Don't allow small problems to turn into larger ones. Troubled families can be helped to lead happier, more satisfying lives.

Cost need not be an obstacle. Many services are free or inexpensive.

Hotlines provide telephone counseling, information on other sources of help, and referrals.

Family stress centers offer counseling on appropriate ways to deal with stress.

Family and social service agencies provide counseling, protection, referrals, and legal advice.

Clergy and religious groups often provide counseling, parenting advice, classes on family life, and referrals.

Shelters offer emergency and short-term lodging, protection, counseling, etc.

Parents Anonymous has chapters nationwide that are dedicated to helping abusive parents and their children through support and counseling.

Self-help groups are available for abusers of alcohol and other drugs, along with their families (for example, Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, and Al-ANON).

Legal assistance centers provide legal help for victims who cannot afford a lawyer.

The National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse helps troubled families and acts as a clearinghouse for information (312-663-3520 or [www.childabuse.org](http://www.childabuse.org)).

Crisis nurseries offer emergency and temporary child care, along with counseling on parenting.

Hospitals and mental health centers offer emergency medical and psychiatric care, as well as inpatient and outpatient psychiatric care.

Police departments may be called for intervention or protection. Many departments have special units that deal with family violence.

Support groups exist for grandparents, their grandchildren, and family members who want support and help.

Women's groups and other informal sources of support can also help victims deal with violence or help you adjust to your role as caregiver.

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

<http://grandparentsraisinggrandkids.tamu.edu>

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