

## *Family Tapestries* Strengthening Family Bonds



### Fact Sheet

## Grandparents Raising Their Grandchildren

**Sharon L. Mader, M.S., CFCS**, Family and Consumer Sciences Extension Agent, Sandusky County, Assistant Professor, Ohio State University Extension, The Ohio State University

It takes a lot of work every day, to be a patient, kind, skillful, communicative, active, optimistic parent for your grandchildren. All parents make mistakes. Good parents learn from them. There are no perfect parents, but thoughtful, joyful, committed parents are truly grand parents. (Williams, 2000, p. 48)

### The Numbers

Grandparents raising grandchildren is not a new phenomenon, but the numbers have almost doubled since 1970. Research indicates it is affecting all ethnic groups and income levels across the nation. According to the 1997 Children's Defense Fund, the number of children living in grandparent-headed households increased 66% since 1990. This was an increase from 3.2% in 1970, 3.6% in 1980, 4.9% in 1990, and 5.5% of all children (nearly four million) in 1997 (Bryson and Casper, 1999). According to the 1998 U.S. Census report, approximately 3.9 million children (5.6%) are being raised by 2.5 million grandparent-headed households.

Since 1990, every state had some grandchildren less than 18 years of age living with grandparents. About half of the grandchildren living in grandparent-headed households were from the following eight states: California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Georgia, and Ohio (1990 U.S. Census Data by State).

### Why are the Numbers Increasing?

A multitude of societal changes contribute to the increasing number of grandchildren living with grandparents:

- death of a parent(s)
- unemployment of the parent(s)
- lack of financial resources
- divorce of parents
- parent(s) abandoning children
- parent(s) with drug and/or alcohol abuse/addiction
- incarcerated parent(s)
- teen pregnancy
- child abuse/neglect
- AIDS

### Challenges Facing Custodial Grandparents

In a survey of 4,700 grandparents conducted by the American Association of Retired Persons Grandparent Information Center, the length of time grandparents served as primary caregiver was 31% for less than a year, 20% for one to two years, and 49% for more than two years. More than 7 out of 10 grandparents indicated their role as the primary caregiver was permanent, 11% temporary, and 17% were unsure of the status. Permanent and temporary custodial grandparents

will encounter a variety of parental concerns, for example, discipline issues, financial support resources, legal issues (i.e., grandparents' rights, custody options), and most importantly, taking care of themselves (Blackburn, 2000). In addition, many grandchildren may have special medical, psychological, and educational needs, often caused by parental mistreatment or neglect.

Grandparents raising grandchildren may also experience stress in dealing with adult children. For example, there may be concerns about:

- conflict over disciplinary decisions
- visits from parents under the influence of drugs or alcohol
- the adult children will assert their parental rights
- shame related to their adult child's behavior

Finally, grandparents may also have fears about what will happen to their grandchildren if they are not able to take care of them.

## Help is Available

Support is available and grandparents should never feel that they are alone. Social agencies and organizations are available to assist custodial grandparents to deal with their many responsibilities and concerns. A directory of services is available from OSU Extension through the Grandparents Raising Their Grandchildren web site at: <http://www.ag.ohio-state.edu/~seniors/gparent/gparent.htm>. Grandparents who do not have Internet access can visit the local public libraries to access the web site. This web site provides information in the following areas:

Child Care, Clothing, Education, Employment, Family Support Services, Financial Assistance, Health Care, Hunger, Housing & Homelessness, Legal Issues, and Support Groups in Ohio.

The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) Grandparent Information Center provides information and resources to help grandparents cope with their primary caregiving roles. For information, contact the AARP Grandparent Information Center at 601 E Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20049, telephone (202) 434-2296 from 9:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. weekdays.

The opportunity for grandparents to take on the responsibility of raising a grandchild is usually not planned. As a result, many grandparents may feel alone and unprepared. Fortunately grandparents can find support from many available sources to assist them in this new role.

## References

- Blackburn, M.L. (2000). America's Grandchildren Living in Grandparent Households. *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences*. 92, pp. 30-35.
- Bryson, K., & Casper, L.M. (May 1999). *Co-resident Grandparents and Grandchildren*. Census Bureau Current Population Reports. Series P23-198, p.1.
- U.S. Bureau of the Census (1990). 1990 Population and Housing: Summary Total file 1C. Washington D.C.: U.S. Bureau of the Census.
- Williams, D.K. (2000). *Grandparents Raising Our Children's Children*. University of Idaho Ag Communications.

*“Nearly 4 million children are being raised in grandparent-headed households.”*