

Parenting Matters

PARTNERS IN PARENTING

Colorado State University

Quarterly Newsletter

October 2000

For Colorado Parents

Parenting Again

Grandparents raising grandchildren

By Kathryn White

On a clear but brisk October afternoon in Fort Collins, Colo., Barb Dyer and Nancy Nicholas can be found watching their six-year-old-granddaughters scurry across the soccer field in a series of dribbles and passes. Barb and Nancy are more than doting grandmothers providing emotional support to their grandkids—they are full-time custodial grandparents.

More and more grandparents are stepping in to take custody of their grandchildren when parents are unable or unwilling to provide proper care. According to the Children's Defense Fund, the number of children living with a grandparent or other relatives increased by 51.5 percent between 1990 and 1998. One in ten grandparents have parented a grandchild for a period longer than six months. Figures obtained from the Denver City and County Human Services Department suggest more than 30,000 grandparents are heads of households in Denver and 76,000 statewide. This figure can only be considered a partial picture, however, because not all families are receiving government assistance.

Reasons for intervention

"Grandparents assume custodial roles for many reasons," says Clifton Barber, Ph.D, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Colorado State University. "Drugs, alcohol abuse, and divorce are among the most common factors why parents

break the parenting link." Other reasons include child abuse, abandonment, neglect, teen pregnancy, physical or mental illness, incarceration, accidental death, and AIDS.



Grandmother, Barb Dyer and sister Melissa help Sara Ann celebrate her 6th birthday.

Issues of health

According to a study conducted by Bowers and Myers, grandmothers saddled with raising grandchildren find themselves confronted with a completely different set of challenges the second time around. Although younger grandparents enjoy relatively good health, older grandparents may be coping with a variety of degenerative health problems. Most predominant is

the issue of stamina. Many grandparents report feeling physically or emotionally drained. "After shuttling my grandchildren to school, soccer practices and games, religious classes, and social activities," says Nancy, "I'm exhausted. If there is something important that needs to be done, I get up early." Barb shares Nancy's sentiments. "I anticipated that providing care for my granddaughters would be a full-time job," says Barb. "But I didn't expect it to absorb all my energy. I have very little energy or desire to do anything else!"

Changes in priorities

For custodial grandparents, late-life dreams get put on hold while the expenses of child rearing can create new financial challenges. In addition, grandparents watch their social lives dwindle, and they don't fit in with the younger parents. Isolation is a common complaint among second-time parents.

"I know I shouldn't feel this way," says Nancy, "but sometimes I resent having to take this on. I love my grandchildren dearly, but Bill and I were looking forward to our retirement years. This week I felt so depressed, I just cried."

Grandparents that assume custodial roles are forced to negotiate through a maze of unfamiliar bureaucracy. Often they must seek welfare assistance, legal custody, medical care, and enroll kids in school. Barb Dyer underwent a

Continued on page 2

long and bitter battle to gain custody of her two grandchildren. "I'm sorry to say, that I really don't like my own daughter," says Barb. "I am the only family these kids have, and it scares me to death to think my daughter might stay clean (drug free) long enough to regain custody."

"My son just isn't responsible and the children's mother is abusive" says Nancy, who parents her two grandchildren, Jessie and Matt. "My husband and I helped our son fight for custody, but we wish we had sole custody. We don't have authority to make all the legal decisions which has really put a strain on us."

Financial burden

Often grandparents in this situation suffer from economic difficulties. Because many elderly people are already living on a low or fixed income, taking care of a grandchild may put their economic future in jeopardy. Some grandparents are forced to make job-related sacrifices while others, who were comfortably retired, quickly deplete their funds when they take on the added expenses. Many grandparents are denied benefits provided to foster parents based on their blood relations to the child, even though they may be just as much in need. Such inadequate assistance only compounds the grandparent's economic difficulties and in a sense penalizes them for their willingness to care for their grandchildren.

"Some days I feel like it is more responsibility that I can handle," says Barb, who single-grandparents both Sara, age 6 and Melissa, age 4. "I remind myself that these little girls are what's most important."

The Bowers and Myers research found the highest level of grandparenting satisfaction reported by the grandmothers, were among those who cared for their grandchildren only part-time. It was not that grandmothers were dissatisfied with having involvement with their grandchildren, rather, there was a critical range of responsibility that these grandparents found optimal.

Grandparents are most satisfied when they can idealize their grandchildren. Both Barb and Nancy readily admit their loss in not being able to be a traditional grandmother. "I hate being stuck in the disciplinarian role," says Nancy, "when my grandchildren visit their parents they are spoiled, and we are the ones providing the limits and discipline. The roles have gotten reversed."

Priceless Rewards

Even with the burden and stress of full-time care of grandchildren, not all is bad about this arrangement. The Bowers and Myers study found that almost all grandmothers who were raising their grandchildren said the relationship with the grandchildren was good or excellent.

"It's certainly not a perfect situation...," says Barb, "a single grandmother raising two granddaughters, but you develop such a bond with them. You share and applaud each accomplishment and believe that by bringing them into your home, they will grow up to be caring, giving adults."



Parenting Matters

Published quarterly by Partners in Parenting
Colorado State University
Cooperative Extension
Program Coordinator: Chris Whaley
Editor: Kathryn White
Questions or comments?
Call us at (800) 457-2736

Resources for Grandparents

Financial Assistance

When faced with the expenses of raising a child, many older adults find they need financial assistance. Two primary sources of assistance exist: Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and foster care stipends.

Other forms of assistance include Medicaid, SSI, Food Stamps and Head Start. These programs are available to grandchildren, regardless of whether grandparents actually have custody. Contact these local offices for the more information.

Organizations

The American Association for Retired Persons (AARP) A national organization dedicated to senior citizens. They have a Grandparent Information Center, which acts as a link between grandparents and the resources available to them.

AARP, Local Chapter
(303) 830-2277

National Coalition of Grandparents
137 Larkin Street
Madison, WI 53705
Contact: Ethel Dunn
(608) 238-8751

Grandparent Resource Center
Provides consultation on legal issues and mediation, support groups, parenting classes, respite, and referrals.
(303) 980-5707

Denver Victim Service Center
(303) 860-0660
Hosts a two-day workshop four times a year for grandparents caretaking their grandchildren. A series of speakers cover topics such as gangs, substance abuse, communication skills, child abuse, parental abandonment, sexuality, discipline, and how to talk to kids. Classes are free to grandparents and include, meals, transportation, and on-site childcare. Contact Hazel Heckers.

Keeping home alone children safe

Every day, millions of school children and their working parents are faced with the challenge of filling the hours from after school until parents can get home from work. Some



children are fortunate enough to be in quality after-school programs that keep them safe and stimulated. Yet, too many others—particularly children in low-income communities—are left alone each day with nothing to do and nowhere to go.

The exact number of kids in self-care is not known because not all parents admit to this practice. Figures provided by the Child Welfare League and the US Census Bureau suggest as many as 12 million children between the ages of 5 and 13 are spending time at home alone while their parents work.

Psychologists, social workers,

pediatricians, and parents are particularly concerned for the physical safety and emotional well-being of kids in self-care. Unsupervised children are much more susceptible to household injuries, sexual exploitation, substance abuse problems, psychological trauma, and gang related activities.

Statistics show that juvenile crime takes place between the hours of 2:00 and 8:00 pm and children are also at greatest risk of being victims of crime during the hours after school.

Before allowing your children to remain home alone, consider and eliminate potential and existing dangers through careful examination of the following:

Age readiness: Consider your child's level of maturity and emotional stability before allowing him to stay home alone. Your child's past behavior and use of good judgment are also good indicators of readiness.

Rules and expectations: Compile and post rules clearly outlining your expecta-

tions and their responsibilities. Discuss your wishes regarding homework, chores, and unstructured time (e.g. watching TV, video games, and the Internet).

Safety proof your home by locking up access to alcohol, tobacco, drugs, guns, "adult" cable, unsafe Internet sites, and other potentially hazardous materials around the house.

Teach and rehearse proper procedures for answering the telephone and door while parents are away. Children should never indicate that an adult is not present. Teach them how to give the caller an excuse for your absence and take a message.

Post emergency phone numbers and contacts: Children should know who to call and how to talk to emergency workers in case of an emergency.

Check-in frequently: Have children check-in often with a parent or trusted neighbor. An adult should be notified when kids arrive home from school or if they leave the house for any reason.

Alcoholism and the family

Robin's father is an alcoholic, but it's hard to tell. He works every day and has a good job—but he drinks every night and almost continuously on the weekends. Everyone in the family has learned to read his moods: his calm and fun-loving self when he is sober, his giddiness when he first starts to drink, and the mounting anger and dangerous outbursts when he has had too much.

Alcoholism is a disease that not only affects the drinker, but the entire family. According to a survey conducted by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, one out of every four American children is exposed to alcohol abuse or dependence at home. Children who grow up with alcoholics have an increased risk of both emotional and developmental problems.

All children need stability, consis-

tency, and structure. This is what helps a child develop good self-esteem, the ability to trust others, and the confidence to tell others how he or she really feels. In an alcoholic family there is often a lot of denial, secrets, and little emotional stability. The alcohol causes the parent to change from caring and loving to angry and neglectful.

Researchers have found that children growing up with an alcoholic parent often develop similar problems: **Difficulty with intimacy and trust.** A cautious untrusting child becomes a cautious, untrusting adult. Grown children of alcoholics are often afraid to get close to others.

Difficulty expressing feelings. Children of alcoholics have learned that negative feelings like anger and sadness are bad, and that only positive feelings are good. As adults, they may pretend to be happy and put on a good face while underneath

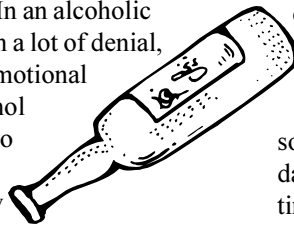
they often feel numb or depressed.

Poor self-esteem. Kids often blame themselves for what happens in the home. Guilt, depression, and inadequacy are common feelings.

Risk of drug abuse. Sons of alcoholic fathers are 4 to 5 times more likely to become alcoholics than sons of non-alcoholics. Similarly daughters of alcoholic mothers are 3 times more likely to become alcoholics than daughters of non-alcoholics.

How to support children

- ✓ Maintain healthy family rituals and traditions, such as vacations, mealtimes, and holidays.
- ✓ Confront the active alcoholic with his or her problem.
- ✓ Help children maintain consistent, nurturing, and positive adult role models throughout their childhood.
- ✓ Moderate to high religious observance can protect many children from the consequences of parental alcoholism.
- ✓ Help children get counseling or find a support group such as Alateen.



Internet resources for kids headed to college

Getting into college these days requires a lot of effort and preparation. A college-bound student must keep track of many deadlines—narrow down schools, take entrance exams, fill out applications—then schedule interviews and tour campuses.

Fortunately, the Internet has become a powerful resource in streamlining the process and providing invaluable information. The groundwork can be done from home if you have access to the Internet or you can get online at your local public library.

US Department of Education

<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/prepare>

The U.S. Department of Education has compiled some very useful (free and printable) pamphlets to help teens and their parents prepare for college.

Getting Ready for College Early

Guidebook. Helps junior high students and their parents understand the importance of early planning. A Spanish version of this document,

Preparándose a Tiempo Para la Universidad, is also available.

Preparing your Child for College- A Resource Book. Includes exercises and checklists for both parents and students. Outlines steps needed year-by-year for students to attend college.

US News Education Center

<http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/>

Look here for college rankings, financial aid, and scholarship guidance and rankings of graduate schools. A career-planning section provides worksheets to help you find the right school, make the most of campus visits, evaluate and compare schools, track deadlines, and submit paperwork.

The Next Step Magazine

<http://www.nextstepmagazine.com/>

Created for college-bound high school students. Get advice on playing college sports and finding roommates. Obtain help with the SAT's and exploring career options.

Embark

<http://embark.com>

A step-by-step guide for getting into the two- or four-year colleges and universities.

College Source

<http://www.collegesource.org/>

Provides access to 13,624 catalogs of U.S. and international schools-online. Hyperlinked to jump to details about course descriptions, faculty information, and admissions requirements.

Collegenet

<http://www.collegenet.com/>

Narrow down schools by region, sports programs, major, tuition, and several other criteria. Link to schools of interest. You'll find a financial-aid search engine and a feature which allows you to submit your application to hundreds of colleges online.

Scholarship Resource Network Express

<http://www.rams.com/srn/>

A search engine and database of private scholarships designed to help students identify sources for undergraduate through postgraduate study. Contains more than 8,000 programs with awards totalling more than \$35 million.

Financial Aid Information Page

<http://www.finaid.org/>

A comprehensive site containing everything you need to know to apply for financial aid.

Colorado State University, U.S. Department of Agriculture and Colorado counties cooperating. Cooperative Extension programs are available to all without discrimination.



This program fully funded by:

Colorado State University
Cooperative Extension
244 Aylesworth Hall NW
Fort Collins, CO 80523
(800) 457-2736
www.colostate.edu/Depts/CoopExt/PIP/

**PARTNERS
IN
PARENTING**

Presorted Standard
U.S. POSTAGE PAID
FORT COLLINS, CO 80523
PERMIT NO. 19