

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

For millions of children, Grandma and Grandpa are doubling as Mom and Dad.

By Alisa Bauman

Parents and Grandparents

More than two years ago, four grandparents in Minnesota made a decision that would forever change their lives and those of their twin grandsons, Danny and Sean. They stepped in as primary caregivers for the then 11-year-olds.

Susan Flagler, 62, the boys' maternal grandmother, and her husband, Jack, 76, forged a unique arrangement with the boys' maternal grandfather, Dennis McGrath, 66, and his wife, Betsy Buckley, 56. The boys would spend two weeks with one set of grandparents and then two weeks with the other.

Danny and Sean's mother, because of her lifestyle choices, was unable to continue being the primary caregiver. The boys' father, because of his schedule as a cross-country truck driver, likewise couldn't offer full-time care (although he sees the boys on weekends, as he has since he and their mother separated). So Susan, Jack, Dennis, and Betsy were thrust into a world of basketball practices, spelling lists, permission slips, doctor's appointments, and sibling rivalries. The set of four grandparents, who live 15 minutes apart in Minneapolis and St. Paul, turned guest bedrooms into boys' bedrooms, brushed up on their knowledge of popular music and video games, and read everything they could get their hands on about child-rearing in the new millennium.

"I didn't know a rap star from a country music singer," says Susan. "I had no knowledge of these newer forms of entertainment, about whether they had violent or sexual content. I would go to my friends and ask them to tell me what was acceptable. They would blink at me and then put me in contact with their children."

Role Reversals

As unusual as it sounds, this story is an increasingly common one unfolding in a growing number of households across the country. Between 1990 and 2000, the number of grandparents raising grandchildren jumped by nearly 30 percent. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, just more than 4.5 million grandchildren -- slightly more than 6 percent of all children in the country -- are cared for by their grandparents. While grandparents often step in to help their adult children temporarily during a move, career change, return to school, or other life-altering events, occasionally the parental shift is long-term or even permanent. The reasons are diverse and sometimes painful, ranging from the death of a parent to incarceration to military deployment, says Faye Abram, PhD, a professor of social work at St. Louis University who facilitates a grandparents-as-caregivers support group.

But the results can be surprisingly beneficial. Research using data from the National Health Interview Survey shows that children raised by their grandparents tend to be more socially adept, and less likely to act out

than children being raised in traditional households. And the grandparents learn a few lessons themselves, not the least of which is this: They still have what it takes to be a parent today, though it may require a steep learning curve.

As Susan Flagler discovered, grandparents face a number of challenges when they are suddenly catapulted back into the parenting role. One day they're the fun grown-ups who always greet a grandchild with a hug. The next day they're a disciplinarian who decides what clothes are worn to school. The shift can cause no small amount of frustration, anger, and even guilt.

"We all look forward to being grandparents because we don't want the yuck. You're supposed to be there for the birthdays and the fun stuff, but not the homework and the booster shots," says Dr. Dan Nelson, medical director for the child psychiatry unit at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center in Ohio. "It's normal to feel frustrated, and then you feel disappointed in yourself for feeling frustrated, because these are your grandkids and you are not supposed to get mad at them."

If your adult children are still in the picture, even on a part-time basis, there's great potential for disagreements about parenting styles. In the end, it can require everyone to compromise about their ideas on what it takes to raise the children.

Tips for Overcoming Challenges

To overcome challenges, experts suggest these tips:

Start with communication. Sit down with your grandchild and talk about the recent change. Explain how the new situation will affect both of you. Try not to assume how your grandchild feels. Instead, ask them outright, "How do you feel about our new living arrangement?" Do more listening than talking and stay focused on the child's concerns.

Come up with rules -- then stick to them. Involve your grandchildren as much as possible in basic decisions, such as what color to paint their bedroom. "Maintain regular routines as much as possible," says Lynne Merk, a psychologist at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center. "Activities and routines, such as scouting and sports, not only keep kids busy, but also provide some regularity to their lives and create a sense of security."

After seeking help from counselors and advice from friends, Betsy, Dennis, Susan, and Jack tried to establish as many comforting routines as possible. The boys eat dinner together with each set of grandparents, say grace before meals, and read or share stories at night. To cut down on the confusion of living in three different homes, the grandparents worked together to establish consistent rules and routines. They communicate by e-mail, phone, and handwritten notes that travel with the boys from one house to another. Whenever possible, the grandparents, along with the father, all attend important meetings, such as parent-teacher conferences and doctor's appointments.

Make your introductions. Taking over as the primary parents likely requires some transition time for more than just you and your grandchild. Once your situation has been established, take some time to meet with your grandchild's teachers, coaches, or other adult caregivers, including the parents of their friends. Establishing contact with these people will help you stay that much more in the loop with your grandchild.

Play the "experience" card. Jack has found it easier to talk to the boys about morals, ethics, and even sexuality and drugs than it was with his four children. "At first I thought it would be difficult for them to lay everything on the table with their grandparents," says Jack. "When I was raising my own kids I didn't know how to approach them. Now I have experience."

Grandparents make excellent primary caregivers, not just because they have the benefit of hindsight, but also because they tend to have fewer career aspirations than adults in their 20s, 30s, and 40s. Dennis says he has more patience now than he did at a younger age. When his son was on the high school football team, Dennis's work schedule prevented him from attending many games. He still works full-time at a home-based business, but he hasn't missed any of his grandson's basketball games.

"You can't go back and fix the mistakes that you made with your own children, but you can, as much as possible, prevent yourself from making those same mistakes again," says Dennis.

Get in shape. Grandparents may notice that the physical demands of raising kids seem much greater than when they were 20 years younger. Give yourself 30 minutes per day to do stretches and exercises, such as brisk walking, to stay in shape. Better yet, stay active with your grandchild: Take a walk together after a meal, or do an activity you can both enjoy, such as horseshoes or golf. Use the time to bond.

Don't do it alone. Support groups put you in touch with other grandparents who can share tips that have worked for them. The American Association for Retired Persons (AARP) offers an online database of support groups for grandparent caregivers on its Web site.

Explore the loss. Talk with your grandchild about the loss of a mom or dad, even if they still see the parents every day. For some kids, suddenly having only part-time access can be traumatic. If the parent is away, your child might write a letter or receive a phone call once a week, suggests Nelson.

Deal with anger and fear honestly. Many children worry that their parents no longer love them or that they will never come back. "They think they did something wrong to cause their parents to go away," says Nelson. Often children will feel anger or resentment toward a parent who has left them, even if it's only for very specific periods of time. Though preteens and teens can often put such feelings into words, younger children experience more difficulty. Encourage children younger than age 10 to express their anger by drawing pictures.

Help kids stay in touch. If the parents are gone from their kids' lives indefinitely but still want active involvement, Merk suggests that the child and the parent send tape recorded messages to one another, along with postcards and pictures. Grandparents can keep parents involved by mailing copies of school

papers along with descriptions of big events, such as the loss of a tooth or the first step. Even keeping a daily journal of the child's activities and mailing it to the parent once a week can be helpful. For parents away on military duty, she suggests posting a map of the world with a push pin indicating the location of the parent. She also suggests keeping one clock set at the parent's time zone overseas.

Vent your frustration. It's normal to feel angry with your children -- and feel guilty about being angry -- for putting you in this situation (even if you volunteered for the job!). Find friends -- not the kids -- to confide in. "You are not wrong for feeling this way," says Nelson.

Don't forget to be grandparents, too. Remember to enjoy the activities you and your grandchildren have always done: Reading a special book together, or setting aside a weekend afternoon where you take a trip to the ballpark or a splurge at the toy store.

Danny and Sean's grandparents celebrate good grades with trips to restaurants. Papa Jack and Papa Dennis play half-court basketball with the boys and take them on fishing trips. Papa Jack, a former Golden Gloves champion, has taught the boys how to box. Whenever they visit their cabin in northern Minnesota, Susan, Jack, and the boys relax on the porch and sip lemonade.

Whatever you choose, it's a given that during those special times, all the rules of good manners and discipline still apply, but go ahead and indulge the kids -- and yourself -- just a little bit.

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