

INSIGHTS

Grandparents as carers



At school pick up time it's common to see people in their '60s, '70s and older greeting young children after school. In secondary school many students are welcomed home by someone in that age group. You may well think that these are grandparents doing a spot of childcare while parents are at work, but increasingly grandparents and relatives of a grandparenting age are caring full-time for children.

A time of mixed feelings

Grandparents who care full-time for children usually do so following a family crisis or loss. Becoming the full time carer can come as a shock. Many grandparents report that their world is turned upside down when they take on full time parenting roles. Not only are they prevented or restricted from participating in their ongoing interests, many experience their life in limbo as they may not know whether the parenting role is permanent or temporary.

While grandchildren may feel safe being with grandparents after a crisis or experience of loss, it's difficult to move from a highly relational grandparent mode to be the person who sets boundaries, makes sure homework is done and gets kids to school on time each day. On top of this many grandparents experience a mixture of emotions including grief for the death or disappearance of a child, anger for being placed in a situation they didn't want or shame for a difficult family situation.

The benefits of being grandparent carer

Conversations with grandparent carers reveal that many grandparents cherish the opportunity to be close to their grandchildren. For men, in particular, the chance to make up for time and milestones that they missed with their own children helps make their time looking after grandchildren worthwhile. Some grandparents also report finding a new lease of life when they become carers.

Mark, a grandparent raising four primary-aged children appreciates the benefits that experience provides. He claims, "I don't stress nearly as much as I did when I was bringing up my two children. Some of the things I used to fight over with them seem ludicrous now. I'm more patient, more understanding and more fun to be around now with this lot. I laugh more now too."

Looking after yourself

According to the Raising Children Network, grandparents who care for children "have higher levels of depression and anxiety and (experience) more physical and emotional health problems than grandparents who aren't carers." The extra responsibilities that come with being a grandparent carer such as dealing with money worries, facing legal issues and lack of peer support means that grandparent self-care is paramount. Age-related exercise, social interaction, a good diet, enough sleep and regular medical check-ups need to be part of the wellbeing regimens for grandparent carers.

In closing

Like parents, grandparents benefit from being part of a school community. A welcoming school community can be a wonderful asset for those who are raising children the second time around.



Michael Grose

Michael Grose, founder of Parenting Ideas, is one of Australia's leading parenting educators. He's an award-winning speaker and the author of 12 books for parents including *Spoonfed Generation*, and the bestselling *Why First Borns Rule the World and Last Borns Want to Change It*. Michael is a former teacher with 15 years experience, and has 30 years experience in parenting education. He also holds a Master of Educational Studies from Monash University specialising in parenting education.