

Through the eyes of a child

Grandparents raising grandchildren



The cycle of family patterns

Sometimes families seem to repeat problems from one generation to the next. This fact sheet looks at ways of breaking negative patterns and reinforcing positive ones. It also looks at depression among grandparent caregivers—how it can affect the grandchild's well-being and where to turn for support.

Patterns across generations

Some family characteristics are likely to be passed on from one generation to the next. The reasons may be due to genetics, similar ways of living, parenting styles, modeling of behaviors and coping strategies, or a combination of these and other factors. The good news is that positive, secure attachment relationships are often passed on to more than one generation. (For a description of attachment relationships, see fact sheets #2 and #3.) The bad news is that negative relationships and problems also can be passed on to more than one generation. These problems can include child abuse and neglect, alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence, criminal behaviors, and mental illness.

Breaking negative family cycles

Problems do not have to be passed from one generation to the next. Researchers looked at families where mothers either continued or broke away from family cycles of abuse. They found that abused mothers who did not abuse their own children had one or more of the following things going for them:¹

- They had a stable, supportive relationship with a husband or partner.
- They had participated in therapy.
- They had received emotional support from a non-abusive adult during childhood.

Grandparents' thoughts and feelings about close relationships

Having a good relationship with your grandchild is very important for the child's development. Many things go into making a good relationship. Of them, researchers have identified two critical factors: (1) how sensitively and responsively the child is treated and (2) the adult's "state of mind" about close relationships.² "State of mind" refers to the way a person thinks and feels about relationships. A person with a positive state of mind talks about memories and feelings in a clear, organized, detailed, and honest way.



Your relationship with your grandchild relates to who you are as a person. Your past and present relationships with others are important for the child to see. It is very difficult to have a loving, secure relationship with a grandchild when other relationships haven't been good or are not working. If you can think about, understand, and learn from past relationships, you can build healthy relationships in the present. Finding and keeping supportive, helpful, and positive current relationships with other adults is also important.

The relationship between you and your grandchild

The new relationship between you and your grandchild can be difficult. You are not the "parent," and you may not feel like a "grandparent" either. Both you and your grandchild may have to make an effort to understand new and different roles and rules for your relationship. The relationship each of you has with the child's parents may complicate the situation, and may require a lot of work and patience.

In some cases, the situation may cause you to think about the relationships you had with your own children. Sometimes it is hard to think back on the kind of parent you were. You may even feel guilty or blame yourself for your grandchild's situation and worry about repeating the same mistakes. Taking care of your grandchildren may seem like too much for you to handle. One thing that may help is to talk with someone about how you are feeling and what you can do to help your grandchild in new ways. Many grandparents say that talking to other grandparents about how they are managing can be helpful. Sometimes,

parenting happens on a day-by-day basis—fixing the problems as they come. Coming to grips with the past will help you and your grandchild move into the future.

Other family relationships

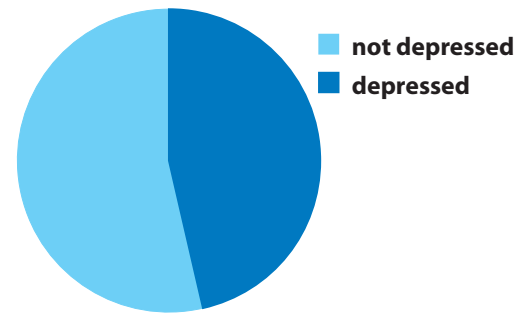
Family members can be a positive source of support or they can make raising your grandchild harder for you. Your other adult children may resent the time you must spend raising your grandchild. They may want you to spend more time with their children and act like a "regular" grandparent. Adult children may feel angry with their brother or sister who is not able to parent. You may feel bad or guilty about the situation. Your grandchild may notice these feelings and feel guilty, too. Open communication with all family members can help everyone feel better. For more on this subject, see fact sheet #5: *The Importance of Open Communication*.

Grandparents' well-being and children's development

In many families, grandparents take on their roles as children's caregivers in times of crisis. In other families, this change occurs in a gradual or planned way. Regardless of how the change occurs, grandparents may feel overwhelmed by the new responsibilities. Stress and depression may arise if the grandparent is dealing with their own health problems, trying to handle a grandchild's physical or behavioral problems, or is not receiving enough support from outside sources or other family members.³

Unfortunately, nearly half of all grandparents raising grandchildren become depressed at some point. Sometimes the depression is temporary, other times it lasts a long time.

Depression strikes nearly half of all grandparents raising their grandchildren⁴

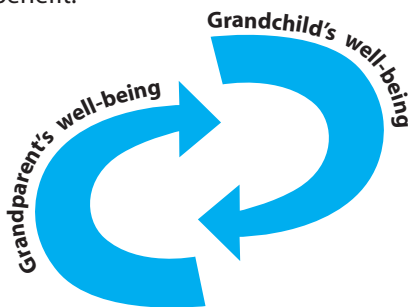


Depression can cause real problems in parenting. Many parents or grandparents who are depressed do not have the energy to take care of the children's needs. They may not be available emotionally, which can affect children's development in many ways. Children who are cared for by a depressed parent experience more:

- Behavior problems
- Problems with developmental skills
- Trouble developing important relationships
- Trouble controlling their emotions
- Social problems

Your well-being is linked to your grandchild's well-being. When there is a problem with one family member, other family members are affected. It is a back-and-forth cycle.

The good news is that all people and all families have strengths. Building on your own strengths and your family's strengths is important. For many families, helping one problem may help other problems. Everyone can benefit.



Where to go for help

If you're worried about your grandchild or are feeling overwhelmed yourself, there are many sources of support available:

- Talk to a trusted friend who is not directly involved in the situation
- Talk to your grandchild's teacher or day care provider
- Talk to your grandchild's pediatrician or family doctor
- Talk to your pastor, rabbi, priest, or spiritual counselor
- Join a support group for grandparents raising grandchildren
- Contact your kinship care worker
- Contact your county Extension office
- Contact a licensed psychologist, psychiatrist, or social worker in your area
- Contact a child welfare agent
- Call a parental stress hotline
- Contact your local early intervention program
- Look for respite care
- Contact your county aging office
- Contact your local Family Resource Center.



Questions to ask yourself

- How would I describe my family? What are or were my parents like? What was my relationship with them like when I was growing up? What is my relationship like with them now (if they are still living)?
- What kinds of things are passed down in my family? What are the positive characteristics or strengths? What are the negative characteristics or problems?
- How do I think about close relationships with others? Am I comfortable getting close to others? Would I rather not be close to others? Or do I want to get very close, almost too close for the other person's comfort?
- What are my feelings when I read through this information? Do I feel defensive or angry? Why?
- Have I ever participated in therapy? Is that something I would consider if I thought it would help my grandchild?
- What was I like as a parent when my own children were growing up? What is my relationship like with my children now?
- What am I like as a grandparent? Do my past experiences affect how I behave and react now?
- Am I, or have I been, depressed? How tired am I? Am I able to respond to my grandchildren in a positive way? Am I emotionally available?
- Am I getting the help that I need? Do I have at least one person I can talk to, someone who will really listen and support me, no matter what?

References

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- ⁴ McCallion, P., and S.R. Kolomer. Depressive Symptoms Among African American Caregiving Grandmothers: The Factor Structure of the CES-D. *Journal of Mental Health and Aging*, 6:325-338, 2000.

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This fact sheet is part of a series. To obtain the rest of the set, visit the University of Wisconsin-Extension grandparenting web site at www.uwex.edu/relationships/. For more information about this series, contact Mary Brintnall-Peterson, University of Wisconsin-Extension or Julie Poehlmann, University of Wisconsin-Madison.