

HelpGuide

HelpGuide's Collaboration with Harvard

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Challenges of Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

Tip 1: Acknowledge your feelings

The prospect of raising grandchildren is bound to trigger a range of emotions. Positive emotions, like the love you feel for your grandchildren, the joy in seeing them learn and grow, and relief at giving them a stable environment, are easy to acknowledge. It's more difficult to admit to feelings such as resentment, guilt, or fear.

It's important to acknowledge and accept what you're feeling, both positive and negative. Don't beat yourself up over your doubts and misgivings. It's only natural to feel some ambivalence about childrearing at a time when you expected your responsibilities to be dwindling. These feelings don't mean that you don't love your grandchildren.

➤ What you may feel

Stress and worry – If you've been used to the occasional visit from a grandchild, being back in the saddle full time *can feel stressful* and overwhelming. You may worry about how you will handle the additional responsibilities and what will happen to the grandkids if something happens to you.

Anger or resentment – You may feel anger or resentment toward the grandchild's parents for leaving you with the responsibility of caring for their child. Or you might be resentful of other friends who are enjoying the retirement you once envisioned.

Guilt – You may feel guilty and responsible for your child's failures as a parent, second-guessing and regretting your own mistakes when you were first parenting.

Grief – There are many losses that come with taking in your grandkids, including the loss of your independence and the easier role of "grandparent," rather than the primary caregiver. You may also be *grieving for your child* and the difficulties that have led to this situation.

When you start to feel overwhelmed...

Remember that while you may not have the energy you did when you were younger, you do have the wisdom that only comes with experience—an advantage that can make a huge difference in your grandchild's life. Unlike first-time parents, you've done this before and learned from your mistakes. Don't underestimate what you have to offer!

Tip 2: Take care of yourself

You probably weren't expecting to be raising kids again at this stage in your life. At times, the physical, emotional, and financial demands may feel overwhelming. That's why it's vitally important that you take care of yourself and get the support you need.

A healthy you means healthy grandchildren. If you don't take care of your health, you won't be able to take care of your grandchildren, either. Make it a priority to eat nutritious meals, exercise regularly, and get adequate sleep. Don't let doctor's appointments or medication refills slide.

Hobbies and relaxation are not luxuries. Carving out time for rest and relaxation is essential to avoid burnout and depression. Use your "me time" to really nurture yourself. Rather than zoning out in front of the TV (which won't revive you), choose activities that trigger the relaxation response, such as deep breathing, yoga, or meditation.

It's okay to lean on your grandkids for help. Kids are smarter and more capable than we often give them credit for. Even young children can pick up after themselves and help around the house which also make your grandkids feel good.

➤ **Support makes all the difference**

Studies show that grandparents who cope well with the added stress of raising grandchildren are those who seek out others for support.

Find someone you can talk to about what you're going through. This will give you a chance to work through your feelings and reach an acceptance of the situation. If you deny or ignore these feelings, they will come out in other ways and may affect your relationship with your grandkids.

Look for support groups for grandparents raising grandchildren. Support groups or even phone support can be very helpful in this journey, and it's a good start for making friends in similar situations. Hearing from people who have been there can help both uplift your spirits and give you concrete suggestions for your situation.

Reach out in your community for childcare help. If you are a member of a church, synagogue or other religious organization, you may be able to ask around for available babysitters. Try library story time hours, chatting up other parents at the playground, or asking your neighbors if they have a reliable teen available to babysit or if any parents are interested in a babysitting swap.

Connect with parents with children. Even if you feel like you are from a different generation, the joys and tribulations of raising children can quickly form common bonds. It may take time, but forging friendships with parents of similar aged children can offer camaraderie and help on navigating the maze of issues facing children today.

Tip 3: Your grandkids will have mixed feelings too

Moving to a new home is never easy, even in the best of circumstances. When children are dealing with the loss of regular contact with their parent or parents, the move is even harder. It will take some time for your grandchildren to adjust, and in the meantime, they may act especially contrary and difficult. And if the children have suffered from emotional neglect, trauma, or abuse, those wounds will not disappear just because they are now in a safe place. They will need time to heal.

Your grandkids may resent being separated from their parent and wish to return, even if their home situation was dangerous or abusive. Don't take this personally. The parent-child bond is powerful. Even if the children are old enough to understand that they're better off with you, they will still miss their parent and struggle with feelings of abandonment.

Your grandkids' feelings may come out in many ways, including behavior. They may lash out *with aggressive or inappropriate behavior*, or they may withdraw and push you away.

No matter their behavior, your grandkids need your comfort and support. If you start to get angry or upset, put yourself in their head. Picture what they've been through, and the confusion, mistrust, and fear they're probably feeling.

Remember that children often act out in a safe place. While it may feel like your grandchildren don't love or appreciate you sometimes, their behavior means they feel safe enough to express frightening emotions.

When grandkids first arrive, they may be on their best behavior. Don't be too discouraged if, after a brief "honeymoon" phase, they start to act out. This doesn't necessarily mean you're doing a bad job, this can be a sign that they finally feel secure enough to vent their true feelings.

Tip 4: Focus on creating a stable environment

While it will take your grandkids time to adjust to their new living arrangement, there are steps you can take to make the transition easier. Above all, your grandchildren need to feel secure. Children thrive in an environment that is stable and predictable.

Establish a routine. Routines and schedules help make a child's world feel safe. Set a schedule for mealtimes and bedtimes. Create special rituals that you and your grandchildren can share on weekends or when getting ready for bed.

Encourage their input in their new home. Let your grandkids help pack and move in their belongings to the extent that they're able for their age. Encourage them to decorate their new room and arrange it as they'd like. Having some control will make the adjustment easier.

Set clear, age-appropriate house rules and enforce them consistently. Children feel more secure when they know what to expect. Loving boundaries tell the child that he or she is safe and protected.

Make sure that each grandchild has a private space. If grandchildren are sharing a bedroom, get creative: use a divider to partition off a private area in a bigger room, erect a playhouse in the backyard, or set up a tent in the family room.

Tip 5: Encourage open and honest communication

Communicating openly and honestly with your grandchildren is one of the best things you can do to help them cope with their new situation.

Plan regular times when you sit and talk to each other, free from TV, phones, games, and other distractions.

Encourage your grandchildren to talk about their feelings, both good and bad. Try to listen without judging or dismissing their feelings.

Help your grandkids learn to identify their emotions. For example, if your grandchild seems upset, you might say, “You look sad. Is something bothering you?”

Young children communicate through play. Young children may not be able to verbalize how they feel but will express themselves through their play.

It’s okay to say, “I don’t know.” You don’t have to have an answer for everything. If you don’t know when mommy’s coming home, for example, be honest about it. Don’t evade the question or lie.

➤ **How much should you tell young grandchildren?**

When deciding what to tell your grandchildren about the situation, it’s important to consider their age and developmental skills. The following tips may help:

- **Avoid telling the child too much.** Many children are simply too young to understand the whole story. Too much information can be confusing, scary, and overwhelming for the child.
- **Avoid telling the child too little or nothing at all.** Kids are smart. They will pick up tidbits about their situation, even if the details are not discussed directly. If children learn about what’s going on from someone else, they could feel hurt, deceived, and confused.
- **Never twist the facts or lie to the child.** Some people may twist the facts to protect the child. But that approach often backfires. When children are told untruths about a situation, they may become very confused, angry, and hurt. The best strategy is to be honest with your grandchildren, at their level of understanding. Your grandchildren will learn the importance of trust and honesty in relationships.

Source: Grandparents Raising Grandchildren, University of Wisconsin-Extension (abbreviated excerpt)