

PART TWO

GRAND RESOURCE

*Help for Grandparents
and Kinship Caregivers
Impacted by Opioids
or Other Substance
Use Disorders*



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Understanding the Impact of the Parent's Substance Use Disorder on the Grandfamily or Kinship Caregiver and Maintaining Your Mental Health as a Caregiver

“ Taking on the role of caregiver for your grandchildren can wreak havoc with your life. You need to take care of yourself, or you cannot take care of others. When you realize that it’s not just you in this situation, you can adapt, and the embarrassment goes away. You must remember why you did this.”

Grandmother Caregiver, Virginia



Is it more common today than before that grandparents are raising their grandchildren?

The United States is experiencing unprecedented rates of substance use disorders (SUD) and related overdose deaths. Opioids are the main driver of overdose deaths.¹ According to the National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics, 3.8 percent of Americans over age 18 abuse opioids every year.² Every day, 136 people die from an opioid overdose and that number is growing.³ If you are a grandparent or kinship caregiver of a child due to the substance use disorder of their parent, your situation is more common than before due to this increasing trend.

Although stepping into the role of parent was not part of your life plan, you can make the best of this difficult situation, which was most likely formed under stress. Raising a grandchild, while challenging, can be incredibly rewarding as you are providing them with a safe, nurturing, and structured home environment in which to grow and feel loved. It's important to acknowledge the range of positive and negative emotions you may be experiencing.

What is a common misconception of grandparents or other kin raising children?

The "it's only temporary" pitfall is something to avoid because nearly half of grandparents responsible for grandchildren have been raising children for over five years.⁴ According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 88% of grandparents believe the child will be with them until adulthood.⁵ This means that most likely this situation is going to last a long time.

“Do what's in your heart if you can do it. I'm grateful that I could help my grandchildren.”

Grandmother Caregiver, Louisiana

I am experiencing challenging emotions. Is this common and why?

Caregivers may suffer their own mental health issues stemming from feelings of grief, shame, loss, or guilt about their adult child's inability to parent due to their substance use disorder. Relative caregivers may suffer social isolation and depression because they do not want their peers to know about their situation or simply because their peers are no longer parenting. Caregiver stress may be exacerbated by trying to maintain or navigate an ongoing relationship between the child and parent. The caregiver is often unsure whether the parent is currently using drugs or alcohol and how their behavior will impact the child. Feelings of sadness, shame and grief may be compounded if a parent has died or been incarcerated.

“When my daughter was using opioids, it was like someone invaded her body. I didn't recognize her anymore.”

Grandmother Caregiver, Louisiana

Here are common negative emotions that caregivers may experience when they step in to care for the child. You may experience some or all of these, or other emotions that are difficult to process:

- **Shock** that you are a parent again, which is an unplanned life event.
- **Confusion** caused by not knowing how to shift your role from grandparent or kin to that of parent.



- **Stress** due to caring for a child that most likely has been traumatized when living with their parent. In particular, the first year of adjustment to the new family situation is the most challenging.
- **Worry** about the child's future should you not be living when the child is older, or about the parent's well-being if they are incarcerated or actively using substances.
- **Insecurity** about the financial burden of meeting the child's needs.
- **Stigma** due to feelings of shame that your adult child is not able to parent.
- **Isolation** from peers because of your inability to socialize with them due to limited childcare.
- **Grief** caused by your loss of freedom, the child's loss of their parent and the parent's loss of enjoying observing their child's developmental milestones. If you are a grandparent to the child you are raising, losing your adult child as you knew them to a SUD or to the system of incarceration is devastating.
- **Guilt** from feeling you are to blame for the situation.
- **Being Blamed** by the child's parent for their problems.
- **Anger** that your life has been turned upside down.
- **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder** resulting from experiencing violent behavior of the parent, court orders removing the child from your home, or witnessing the parent in criminal behavior and the daily trauma that accompanies their downward spiral caused by their SUD.
- **Resentment** from being placed in this situation.
- **Conflict** resulting from a desire to protect yourself and do what is best for the child or from loving the parent and the problems their behavior has caused.
- **Loss** if the parent dies, or your lack of freedom when dreams of retirement or other plans are replaced with the responsibility of raising another child. If you are a grandparent, you may experience loss of the traditional grandparent role.
- **Depression** caused by the stress and fatigue that comes along with the crisis in your family and the demands of raising a child.

There are also positive emotions resulting from this shift in responsibility:

- **Relief** that the child is safe under your care.
- **Joy** while watching your grandchild or kin child grow and thrive.
- **Satisfaction** that comes with providing your grandchild or kin child with a safe, nurturing, and structured home environment where they feel loved.
- **Hope** as your family moves from crisis to stability over time.



What are some other common experiences when assuming the role of a parent?

Findings in a report that was delivered to the U.S. Congress in 2021 prepared by the Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Advisory Council (SGRG)⁶, noted a recurring theme. Most have no idea what legal options exist in their states and for their unique circumstances, nor do they have time to educate themselves on the topic. Instead, they find themselves putting aside their own lives— retirement, work, sometimes other children—to care for a child that is most likely traumatized by removal from the parent(s) and the events that led to that removal. The kin and grandparent caregivers who are not licensed foster parents must house, clothe, nurture, feed, protect, educate, and provide for medical care, often entirely at their own expense. The adults in these families also need assistance and education in parenting children with behavioral or mental health challenges.

How can I help myself?

Your mental and physical health is the foundation for today and the future. You need time to heal from this unforeseen crisis and challenge. Focus on your recovery and know that the healing process takes a long time.

- Seek support for your mental health by working with a therapist or counselor. Recognition of the phenomena of grandparents or other kin raising children due to a substance use disorder is recent, and so the availability of experienced therapists is limited. You can screen potential providers to find someone who best suits your needs.
- Keep up on your health maintenance by seeing your doctor, getting enough rest, exercising, and eating properly.
- Find a local or online support group for others who share your experience, and you will not be alone. You will also learn about resources that you may not be aware of.
- Understand that this is not your fault. You are doing everything you can to provide love and care for the child now.
- Often, friendships are lost when change occurs. Call old friends and discuss current topics, books or television shows to stay connected.
- Carve out daily “me time” for your endurance and well-being even if it is as simple as taking a walk or having a cup of tea.
- Establish some childcare, even if it is very limited, and take a break.
- Work to discover common ground with younger parents or other parents of different ages and backgrounds.
- Offer reasonable support to the parent. For example, help them to locate a program for their SUD.
- When necessary, draw the line with the parent. Sometimes a family contract about expectations is necessary to guide expectations when family time includes them.
- If you are married, work with your spouse to find time to connect and keep your relationship intact. Opportunities to spend time together will be different, but they can be just as rewarding as the time before you were parenting once again.



- Establish healthy household routines for the child and stick to them so you benefit from routines and predictability.
- Give yourself permission to do what works when it comes to all family. A SUD often causes difficulty among family relationships. Vacations, interactions with the parent and your other children, and among grandchildren may have new dynamics. Time spent with your family can be enjoyable even if the structure of the time together has changed.
- Set boundaries for yourself and family and stick to them.

“ I had to make friends with parents that were younger than me so our kids could be friends.”

Grandmother Caregiver, Washington

How can I prepare for legal proceedings or social service interventions regarding custody?

Legal issues around custody and the court system may cause significant levels of stress because of the uncertainty around whether the child will remain in your care. The court system sometimes lacks understanding about the child’s needs, and custody proceedings vary from state to state. Also, the availability of social services may be limited, and staff may lack training. Strongly position your mental and physical health as much as you possibly can so that, when the challenging times arise, you are as prepared to handle them as possible. You can find out about legal resources here: grandfamilies.org



“ When the police came to take my grandchildren in the middle of the night and return them to my daughter, I felt like I was going to have a nervous breakdown. The experience of the children being court ordered back and forth was devastating. The stress led to three strokes.”

Grandmother Caregiver, Louisiana

“ Dealing with social services was as traumatic to me and my grandson as the situation. Our case dragged on for a year and a half. Early on, when he had to attend visitation with his parents at the Social Services office, it was very confusing for him as he was only 4 years old and the trauma was so fresh in his mind. He would have complete breakdowns. I would hold him all night long because he was shaking.”

Grandmother Caregiver, Colorado

What are some typical comments to expect from others and how can I respond?

Stepping in to care for a child due to their parent's substance use disorder is commonly misunderstood. People, even though they are well-meaning, may say things that are uncomfortable for you. For example, friends who have little understanding may say that you should simply make the parent "step up". Here are some examples of comments and responses that may help you:⁷

- "It must keep you young raising a child again."
Your response: "It's a challenge but I do my best."
- "Why aren't his parents raising him?"
Your response: "That's a private matter."
- "I could never do what you do."
Your response: "Sure you would if it was your grandchild."
- "Does she miss her mother?"
Your response: "I imagine so."
- "Does it feel weird to be your age and raising a grandchild again?"
Your response: "It feels like we are doing the right thing."

How can I use my experience to make things better?

/// I found an opportunity to return to work in a position that really meant something to me."

Grandmother Caregiver, Washington

/// I took the pain and made it my passion, so others don't have to go through what I did."

Grandmother Caregiver, Louisiana

Remember, don't blame yourself. You were not responsible for causing this and are not responsible for fixing it. It's tempting to think it is your fault so you can think you have the power to fix it, but remember that you cannot control your loved one's SUD. It is time to focus on YOU and remember why you decided to step up to help your grandchild.

Through this hardship, if you can find some way to do something to make things better, you will feel better. Many grandparents have benefitted from attending support groups or finding related volunteer or employment opportunities such as forming a support group or working to develop kinship navigator programs in their states that provide links to available resources for caregivers. Some caregivers advocate for grandfamilies or kinship families by talking with lawmakers and politicians about unmet needs. If you can build relationships with others who are trying to make a positive difference, you never know what healing opportunities may arise.



“ Find your ‘peeps’, it’s the best thing you can do to help yourself. When you realize it’s not just you, the angst and embarrassment go away.”

Grandmother Caregiver, Virginia

Further Resources: Understanding the Impact of the Parent’s Substance Use Disorder on the Grandfamily or Kinship Caregiver and Maintaining Your Mental Health as a Caregiver

- [Raising the Children of the Opioid Epidemic: Solutions and Supports for Grandfamilies](#)
- [Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Council \(SGRG\) Report to Congress](#)
- [American Association of Pediatrics, Children in the Opioid Epidemic: Addressing the Next Generation’s Public Health Crisis](#)
- [WebMD, Opioid Abuse Statistics: Who’s Affected and Why?](#)
- [HelpGuide.org, Grandparents Raising Grandchildren](#)
- [Grandfamily Caregiver Tip Sheet: Self Care](#)

Further Resources: Grandfamilies

- [grandfactsheets.org](#)
- [grandfamilies.org](#)
- [GKSNetwork.org](#)
- [gu.org](#)
- [brookdalefoundation.net/RAPP/rapp.html](#)



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Endnotes

- 1 Center for Disease Control and Prevention. "Death Maps and Graphs"
www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/deaths/index.html
- 2 National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics. drugabusestatistics.org/opioid-epidemic
- 3 ibid
- 4 U.S. Census Bureau. American Community Survey. "Grandparents Living with Grandchildren under 18 Years by Responsibility for Own Grandchildren By Length of Time Responsible for Own Grandchildren for the Population 30 Years and Over." Table B10050. 2021 1-Year Estimates. data.census.gov
- 5 Adesman, A. and Adamec, C. The Grandfamily Guidebook. Center City, MN: Hazelden Publishing, 2018.
- 6 Administration for Community Living. "Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Act Initial Report to Congress" 2021. acl.gov/SGRG/report
- 7 Adesman, A. and Adamec, C. The Grandfamily Guidebook. Center City, MN: Hazelden Publishing, 2018.





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About Generations United's National Center on Grandfamilies

Founded in 1986, Generations United's mission is to improve the lives of children, youth, and older adults through intergenerational collaboration, public policies and programs for the enduring benefit for all. Generations United's National Center on Grandfamilies is a leading voice for families headed by grandparents, other relatives, and close family friends. The Center's work is guided by an advisory group of caregivers, known as GRAND Voices, and organizations that set the national agenda to advance public interest in support of these families. Center staff conduct federal advocacy and provide training to grandfamily practitioners, advocates and caregivers to elevate their voices to improve policies and practices. The Center raises awareness about the grandfamilies' strengths and needs through media outreach, weekly communications, and awareness-raising events. It offers an annual State of Grandfamilies report and a broad range of guides, fact sheets and tools for grandfamilies, which cover issues from educational and health care access to financial and legal supports (gu.org and grandfamilies.org). Generations United is also home to the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network, the first-ever national technical assistance center for those who serve grandfamilies and kinship families (gksnetwork.org.)