

Introduction



In 1983 my sister committed suicide. She locked the doors of her house and overdosed on pills that had been prescribed for depression. She didn't leave a note. She did leave an eight-year-old son. She was 27 years old.

I was away in graduate school, finishing a master's degree in social work. My sister and I had a standing phone date. Every Saturday morning at six o'clock I would call her. My nephew would be asleep, and we could talk without interruption. As a single mother, my sister didn't have much time without interruption. Since Kevin would wake up at some point during the call, I would talk with him, too. Nikki and I were close in age—one year and one week apart—and we were best friends.

That Saturday I called and called, but there was no answer. I finally called my parents to see if they knew where Nikki was. Kevin had spent the previous night at my brother's house and was scheduled to stay with my parents that night to give his mother a free weekend. But she hadn't said anything about going out. We decided they should use the spare key and go in. It didn't work. One lock wouldn't open. It was the one Nikki locked from inside. "She's in there, Mom," I said. "I know she's in there." My parents had the police knock down the door. Nikki was there, but it was too late. I caught the next plane to Los Angeles (by this time, it was early the next morning).

Overnight, we went from a family of five adults to one of four, a hand

with a missing finger. We were devastated, and we were in shock. Grief had joined our family.

And then there was Kevin.

Kevin had always been the family child. Nikki dropped out of school at 18 to have him. His father was never part of the picture.

And although Nikki and Kevin had their own apartment, my parents, my brother, and I were always helping out in different ways. Kevin was lovable and he was difficult. Now, at the age of eight, he was parentless.

There was no question of what to do. My parents took Kevin in, and in that moment they became part of a family much larger than ours, although we didn't know it then. They joined the growing ranks of grandparents who are raising their grandchildren.

The media call them "silent saviors,"¹ "recycled parents,"² and, when they are also caring for aging parents, "the sandwich generation."³ At a time in their lives when they expected to be traveling, enjoying hobbies, and doing everything they had put on hold while raising their first set of children, they find themselves back in a routine of bottles, diapers, and PTA meetings, sometimes 30 years after they last had kids in the house. Instead of doting grandparents who can spoil and coddle and send the kids back to Mom and Dad, they are surrogate parents with all the responsibilities of raising another set of children.

Some are as young as 35, others are in their 80s. Some are even great-grandparents and stepgrandparents. They cross economic lines, social lines, and religious lines. They become caregivers because of abandonment, neglect, and abuse, as well as death by illness, accident, suicide, and murder. In some instances their adult children are in jail or mentally ill. In other instances a single parent is unemployed or deployed by the military. But the most common reason grandparents raise grandchildren, by far, is parental drug and alcohol abuse.

The kids these grandparents get are troubled, burdened with everything from emotional, behavioral, psychological, medical, and academic problems to physical disabilities from a parent's prenatal drug and alcohol abuse.

Almost six million children live in the homes of their grandparents. Even so, too many grandparents think they are in this alone. Not a day goes by that I don't get calls, letters, and e-mails from grandparents around the country who are looking for a group, a piece of information,

or someone to listen to them who will understand their concerns. The letters come typed, written, and scribbled in crayon, on everything from napkins to torn scraps of paper. Some write “Dear Ms. de Toledo” or “Dear GAP [Grandparents As Parents]” and tell their stories; others just write “Help!” One grandparent in Georgia seemed to say it for all of them when he wrote, “I took my grandson when his mother died six years ago. Ten months ago, his dad died. We need people. My friends call once in a while but don’t come around. We are like in a world alone. We need people.”

This book had to be written because there was absolutely nothing out there back then to answer those letters. I talked to thousands of grandparents across the country and realized there was nothing to help these families. People asked me about resources, and because I had nowhere to refer them, I would offer to help start a group in their community.

Before I started my first Grandparents As Parents support group in 1987, I searched a number of libraries for information on grandparents raising grandchildren. I was looking for a foundation. If there was material out there, I didn’t want to reinvent the wheel. Unfortunately, I didn’t find anything in the professional literature, let alone the consumer press.

By the time the first edition came out, GAP had grown into an organization of nine support groups across southern California and had already helped start hundreds of others throughout the country. Local grandparent groups across the United States had joined forces to create a strong national voice on grandparent issues. Researchers had begun to study the grandparenting phenomenon, and a few authors had published books on the changing role of grandparents.⁴ Still, there was nothing out there that addressed the broad spectrum of grandparent issues in one place.

And for all the websites and manuals that have cropped up in the intervening years, there are still few places that hold a grandparent’s hand so well, through so many of the twists and turns of second-time parenting.

So, this is *GAP: The Book*. It is part map, part dictionary, and something of a group hug—a handbook for all grandparents who are raising grandchildren, to help them through the stressful times. Inside you will find descriptions of many of the common problems grandparents face when they take in their grandchildren, as well as practical suggestions for how to cope. You will also find basic information on topics such as government aid, court proceedings, and special education. I hope this book

will help get you through the alphabet soup of AAP, SSI, IEP, ISFP, WIC, and CPS. In these pages you will find guidelines for finding and forming groups, two sure ways of empowering yourself in a situation that can often make you feel powerless. Here, as in a GAP meeting, I offer support, resource information, and a professional perspective. But it is the other grandparents who will let you know you are not alone, that you can get through this, that whatever you are going through is normal. In the following pages, you will hear their voices and their stories.*

Second-time parenting can be pretty grim sometimes. You face troubled children, uncooperative parents, and a bureaucracy that may not understand your new role or support your new needs. This book does not shy away from those stark realities. It does not suggest that if you follow a prescribed set of steps, your problems will vanish. Life isn't that simple. It does, however, offer hope. By raising grandchildren, you offer them a new future. By learning your options you give yourself choices. By recognizing problems you learn when to adapt and when to fight back. And by joining forces you create hope for the grandparents who follow you.

A NOTE TO PROFESSIONALS WHO WORK WITH GRANDPARENTS

I hope this book will also provide insight for people who work with grandparents: mental health professionals, teachers, doctors, attorneys—anyone who comes in contact with grandparents raising grandchildren and children being raised by their grandparents.

I receive frequent requests from educators and mental health professionals about how to develop groups for grandparents. My work is based on years of observing and doing therapeutic work with grandparent families, as well as on personal experience with my own family. This treatment incorporates many aspects: crisis intervention, individual needs assessment, meeting survival needs of individual families, modeling cop-

*So as to avoid using sexist language—and so as not to encumber the book with an excessive use of “he or she” and “him or her”—we have decided to alternate between masculine and feminine pronouns. We have attempted to do this consistently, and have tried to avoid ascribing the male and female pronouns in a stereotypical way.

ing skills, teaching problem-solving techniques, and supportive therapy. Some of the work I do is nontraditional for mental health professionals, but I believe it is critical for grandparent families.

Chapter 14 specifically addresses support groups for grandparents: how to find them, how to start them, and what programs and principles have been successful for GAP. The chapter is designed to assist both grandparents and mental health professionals in the rewarding process of developing groups; I hope it helps you.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

Grandparents as Parents is designed as both a book and a manual. You can read it front to back, following the grandparent stories that span the chapters, or you can turn to whatever chapter addresses your immediate questions, without worrying about order.

The book is divided into three sections. Section I, “When the Second Shift Arrives,” covers the personal and social aspects of raising grandchildren: the changes, the feelings, and the problems of adult children, grandchildren, and family in general. It starts with an overview of the recent rise in grandparents as parents and looks at some of the myths about the phenomenon. Section II, “Through the Red Tape,” addresses the bureaucratic part of raising grandchildren, the legal issues, and the availability of government assistance and special education. And Section III, “Strength in Numbers,” focuses on the larger community of grandparents as parents and provides information on finding, starting, and nurturing support groups.

Grandparents as Parents represents the work of two authors—myself and journalist Deborah Edler Brown—yet it is written from one point of view. The reason is simple: We wanted this to be a comfortable, personal book, and years of working with grandparents has given me an intimate understanding of the subject. As you read through the following chapters, the voice and perspective you encounter will be mine. I hope they help you.



When my sister ended her life, a whole world ended for me. And another one opened. Somehow, when I see the growth of GAP, I feel that something positive is coming from the death of my sister. There is a special place in my heart for grandparents who are parenting again. You all deserve a gold medal for what you're doing. You have sacrificed to be here, and my heart goes out to you.

SYLVIE DE TOLEDO



Grandparents as Parents accurately conveys the themes that are the most central to grandparents who are raising grandchildren, but the names and identifying characteristics of most of the grandparents and grandchildren mentioned in the book have been changed in order to protect their privacy.

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