

Custody tough for grandparents

Most grandparents say that one bonus of being a grandparent is that they can have all the fun of their grandchildren when they visit, then hand them back to their parents. However, there is one group for whom life is not so full of unfettered joy.

They are the grandparents who are both parent and grandparent, because they have permanent care of the grandchildren. Their lives can be pretty tough.

Though they have loads of experience as parents, they were looking forward to some time in their later working lives and in retirement when they would not have to take responsibility for others. Instead, through unforeseen circumstances such as mental illness, drug or alcohol problems or death of their children, they have become "parents" a second time.

But this time they are older, probably less energetic and, if retired, may not have enough money to care for their grandchildren as they would wish. Naturally, they love their grandchildren dearly. It's because of this that they step in to help when their sons or daughters can no longer care for their children.

These grandparents often worry about becoming ill and not being able to care for their grandchildren, and having to dip into their retirement nest eggs to provide the basics. Sole grandparents may also have to abandon their retirement plans, and they may not feel confident about their ability to parent a new generation. They may feel they have unwittingly put up their hands for the following job:

WANTED: responsible person M/F to undertake 20-year project. Candidates should be totally committed, willing to work up to 24 hours a day, including weekends. Current knowledge of healthcare, nutrition, psychology, child development and the education system essential. No training or experience needed. No salary, but a very rewarding job for the right person.

One grandmother whose daughter had died was working part-time and caring for her ill husband when she found her son-in-law had little interest in the children, aged six and eight. She took on the care of both, which meant giving up her paid job. But the children's legal guardian is still their father, who avoids providing support and makes life difficult by refusing to give permission for medical procedures and school camps that require a guardian's signature.

Other grandparents find becoming fulltime carers for grandchildren actually renews their lease on life. They get involved in the school community and in gardening, breakfast clubs and reading programs.

These people are wonderful role models. Much loved and respected they may also fill a gap for their grandchildren's friends, who may have little to do with their own grandparents or older people. One practical difficulty grandparent carers under pension age can face is they do not qualify for respite care, something that can make the job of sole grandparenting much easier.

When grandparents first become permanent carers for grandchildren, they may also be grieving for the loss of their own child. If there has been a death, or for the loss of a relationship if a marital separation had required them to step into the parenting role.

Such a situation can be difficult, but many grandparents find that attending grandparents' groups can be a great help. Grandparents who have attended such groups say a support group gives them a chance to learn the skills needed to better manage their situation.

They also say it is a comfort to know they are not alone, and that other grandparents are facing similar challenges.

Survival tips

The following groups are sources of help for grandparenting issues:

- **Relationships Australia** **Ph: 1300 364 277**
- **Grandparents Australia Inc.** **Ph: 9372 2422**
- **Mirabel Foundation** **Ph: 9527 9422**