

Parents the Second Time Around

by Linda Carlson Johnson

The twin boys, now 5, have never known their mother; she died shortly after their birth. Since then, the boys have lived with their father and his mother. Suddenly, their dad committed suicide, leaving the boys' grandmother with sole responsibility for their care.

At The Right Place, a Salvation Army operated school readiness center in Hartford, Connecticut, the teachers know right away that something is wrong. The boys seem resentful of everyone, even other children. At naptime, one of the twins says, "Nobody likes me. I hate this world, and I want to die."

Talhaht Mannan, director of The Right Place, knows that this is a tough situation, but, she says, "I already have a plan for this grandmother." Mannan knows a great deal about her: she doesn't have a job, a high school diploma, or a family support system. And she's overwhelmed by her new responsibility.



Before he died, the woman's son wasn't a very reliable parent; he was often out of the picture. But when his mother needed a break, she could call on him and say, "Take your sons and go." No more.

"Now she has nobody to turn to," Mannan says. But she's not ready to give her grandchildren up to anyone else. When Mannan suggested that the twins might be better off placed

with a family, the grandmother said, "Oh, my God, how could I do that?"

So Mannan's plan is to find this newly single parent some practical help.

"We need to help get her back *together*," says Mannan, "to help her get education and training" so she can find a good-paying job.

The twins have started half-day kindergarten, but the grandmother would prefer to have them in care at The Right Place all day. Mannan tells her a full day's care won't be possible, but she says the boys can come to the center after school until 5 p.m.

Cheerleading for grandparents

An important part of Mannan's plan for this grandmother is a large dose of encouragement. That's necessary because, like many grandparents taking on this *second-time-around* parenting role, this grandmother feels that she failed her own children — and fears failing her grandchildren, too.

"We want to say to her, 'It's commendable for you to take on this role,'" Mannan says. "And we want to be there to help." At The Right Place, which serves 139 children in the School Readiness program (ages 3-5) and an after-school program called Girls, Inc., about 20 percent of the children are from homes where a grandparent — almost always a grandmother — is the primary caregiver.

Mannan says she is glad to be connected to The Salvation Army because of its mission of serving others and because of the many Army programs that are available, such as the Family Center and the Second Time Around program at a Senior Center just a block from the daycare center.



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At The Right Place, it's hard to tell from a child's behavior whether the primary caregiver is a parent or grandparent. That's because, in inner-city Hartford, one of the poorest cities in the nation, most children arrive with behavioral challenges.

"With TV and video games and the culture around them . . . children are exposed to things they are not ready to absorb or understand," Mannan says. "This can lead to children who are aggressive, challenging, strong-willed."

On the family plan

For many of these children's parents, and grandparents taking on a primary role in rearing children, Mannan says that for the caregivers of these children, including grandparents, "The economy is just not working for them. They are strapped, undereducated, and low-income. Many are holding down two jobs."

To help, The Right Place has an individual plan for each child — and that child's family. As part of The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving's Child Care Enhancement Project, The Right Place uses *The Creative Curriculum* (Teaching Strategies, 2003), which involves intensive training for teachers to help them with the behaviors they encounter in children and to engage parents in the educational process.

"We do parent intake to assess individual needs," says Mannan. "We organize parenting events on a once-a-month basis; we work with high school dropouts to get their GEDs; and if they are not working, we help them find a job In the long run, if a parent gets more education or a higher-paying job, the child has more stability, is more comfortable, and has a sense of belonging."

That's something all children need. But for children being raised by grandparents, the need is all the more acute, because the children often have been traumatized very early in life. According to the American Academy for Pediatrics, grandparents come into the picture as caregivers when the children's parents divorce, die, or become disabled; when a teenage daughter has a child and can't or won't take responsibility; or when parents are abusive, ill with HIV/AIDS, incarcerated, or abusing alcohol or other drugs.

Surviving guilt trips

For grandparents facing the challenge of raising children all over again, the guilt and burden can seem overwhelming.

"At first, I felt responsible," says Ruth Masters, who is raising her twin grandsons in a *sandwich* family that includes her own mother as part-time caregiver and a grown son (not the children's father) living in the house. "I wondered what I did wrong that my child would not raise the kids When you raise your kids, you think that you'll have a perfect little family, and they will grow up to raise their own perfect little family. You can feel so alone as a grandparent with kids."



Ruth Masters (in back), has been raising her twin grandsons since they were 20 months old. Her mother, Betty Forbes, 78, sometimes helps out.

Over time, Masters has come to grips with her guilt. "Now I feel as if I made mistakes, but I can't blame myself for what my child didn't do. It's in the boys' best interest to be with me."

In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, social worker Gloria Luten started a God-Sent Grandparents support group when she noticed an increasing number of grandparents requesting holiday assistance. She had investigated and found that many of the grandparents who were raising their grandchildren were also facing health problems, financial difficulties, and often, tremendous guilt over their children's failure as parents.

Richard and Margaret Allen, who both have jobs, are raising their granddaughter in Connecticut. Both of the girls' parents are alcoholics; but the Allens hope that one day soon, the mother will finish rehab and take custody of her daughter.

"I have no hope at all that that will happen," says Linda Vega. "[My daughter] lives only 15 minutes from me, but the only time she sees [her two children] is when I force them on her. When she does have them, she just sits them in front of the TV. She's 31. The little one has ADHD; the older one is hyperactive and very insecure. She just about made it through first grade. Neither one of them has seen their dad since they were a year or two old." Vega's daughter, now 32, has kicked her drug and alcohol habits, but she has

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expressed no interest in taking the two children back. One of the children, a girl, is in counseling because she is so angry with her mother. "As she gets older, she gets angrier," says Vega.



Betty Hardy, who is raising her five-year-old granddaughter, says that she recently got a call from school to come in and talk about the girl's aggressive behavior. Hardy, a lead teacher at The Right Place, says that her granddaughter still feels angry at her mother for leaving her with her grandmother.

Danger of heartbreak

When children live with grandparents, the custody situation can change suddenly, and that can affect both children and grandparents. Peg (last name withheld), who took custody of her granddaughter at age 3, had to give her up at age 12 when she went back to live with her mother. "I was heartbroken. It was like a death," Peg says.

Shifting custody can also be an issue for caregivers in child-care centers. If a child, from infancy, knows no other parent than the grandparent, Mannan says, the child will tend to have a sense of stability. But when children move from parents to grandparents, she says, "They are resentful, even of their peers. They say things like, 'I hate everybody.' They become reserved and won't participate. They feel rejected and abandoned by parents."

So what's a caregiver to do? Here are a few suggestions:

- Talk to the grandparent, at intake, about a child's situation. Keep checking in to see how it is working out.
- Provide referrals, as needed, to support groups, mental health professionals, social agencies, legal assistance, and clergy. One place to start is the Grandparents Information Center sponsored by AARP.
- Work with grandparents on establishing consistent discipline at home and school. Grandparents who were expecting to be nurturers, not disciplinarians, for their grandchildren, may need assistance in setting consistent limits.

Grandparents Count

- 4.5 million children are living in grandparent-maintained homes. In 1970 that was true for only 2.2 million children.
- 2.4 million children are living in homes where a grandparent has primary responsibility for child care.
- 1.9 million of the children are living in households with incomes at or above the poverty line.
- Grandparents raising grandchildren range in age from their 30s to their 60s and beyond. Nearly half are between the ages of 50 and 65.
- Most single grandparents raising grandchildren are women.

Figures: U.S. Census Bureau



Luella Pipkin, 67, has been responsible for the care of more than 30 of her grandchildren at one time or another.

- Encourage grandparents and provide them with much-needed breaks. During December, for example, The Right Place opened in the evening so grandparents, knowing their grandchildren were in a safe place, could feel relaxed about going on an evening shopping trip. Another outing that month was for dinner and a movie.
- Involve grandparents in children's learning. Many grandparents feel intimidated or at a loss when it comes to education, either because of their own lack of schooling or the years of distance since their last school experience.
- Develop a plan for each child that includes the grandparent. Meet with grandparents on a regular basis to ensure that the plans are working for their grandchildren.

Grandmother Ruth Masters says that in a perfect world, her grandsons would not be with her. "But they are, and I believe that's where they need to be," she says. Being a parent all over again, she says, is "hard at times, but it's got its rewards."

For Talhaht Mannan, The Right Place director, the work of a child care center is not just confined to the children, parents, and grandparents she serves. "We want to better [children's] lives. If they receive a quality early childhood education, they won't fall behind or drop out of school, they will stay out of crime, and they will do well at raising their own children. These are the long-term benefits to good early child care." She says her job-satisfaction quotient is very high. "I've never felt as rewarded as I do here. This is truly serving the community."

Resources

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, at The Grandparents Information Center at the American Association of Retired Persons (2004). Web site: www.AARP.org.

DeNavas-Walt, C., Proctor, B. D., & Mills, R. J. (2004). "Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2003," pp. 60-226." Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.

The Foundation for Grandparenting, California Communication Center, 108 Farnham Rd., Ojai, CA 93203. Web site: www.@grandparenting.org.

Kinship Care Project Overview (1999). Lansing, MI: Michigan State University School of Social Work.

"Resources for Grandparents: A Guide to Relatives Caring for Children," Second Edition (Fall 2002). Baltimore, MD: Maryland Department of Aging. Web site: www.mdoa.state.md.us.

"Teaching Strategies Newsletter," Issue 45, Nov. 1, 2004, Teaching Strategies, Inc. (Contains information on The Right Place, *The Creative Curriculum for Infants & Toddlers* and *The Creative Curriculum for Preschool*). Web site: www.teachingstrategies.com.

"Through the Eyes of a Child: Grandparents Raising Grandchildren," #B3786-4 (2003). University of Wisconsin-Extension, Cooperative Extension, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Wisconsin counties. This fact sheet is part of a series. Web site: www.uwex.edu/relationships.

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

The Importance of Intake Information: This article highlights the importance of accurate and complete intake information for program administrators and teachers for the successful enrollment of every child. If your program doesn't have social work staff to support the gathering of enrollment information, design and implement a strategy to insure that program staff have a clear understanding of the family situation upon enrollment. Consider written questionnaires, conferences, telephone calls, and any other strategy that might increase the likelihood that those who need to know have all the information to support new children and their families.

Need to Know: Confidentiality of information is of crucial importance for all families and may be even more important to diverse family forms. Review your program's confidentiality policy with teachers to make sure everyone understands who needs to know what and when and where details about families should be discussed or revealed. Develop scenarios that reflect real situations in your program for teachers to grapple with during this discussion.

Surviving Guilt Trips: The guilt trip discussed by Johnson is worth discussing. How can the program support those who assume parenting roles and are suffering under the burden of guilt? Start with the good ideas mentioned in the article as a springboard for considering many ways to provide support.