

Grandparents' Raising Their Grandchildren

Grandparents' raising their grandchildren is a growing trend both in Alabama and the United States. According to the 2000 Census, more than 2.4 million grandparents are responsible for about 4.5 million grandchildren. In Alabama, more than 10 percent of children are raised by a grandparent or other relatives.

In some counties, that rate swells to as high as 20 percent. Dr. Wilma Ruffin, a family and child development expert with the Alabama Cooperative Extension System, says these skipped generation families face challenges even in the best of economic times. However, the current recession can make life even harder for these families.

"Imagine you are retired living on a small pension and your Social Security benefits," says Ruffin. "Now imagine you are now caring for a 12-year-old grandson and an infant granddaughter. Your monthly budget must include additional food for a growing preteen as well as formula and diapers for the baby. Plus, you will need to buy clothes and shoes for these growing youngsters."

She notes other expenses may increase as well. Grandparents may find their gasoline bills rise because of trips to school, doctors and other activities. "Out of pocket medical expenses may rise as well because most health insurers won't cover grandchildren unless the grandparent is the legal guardian," says Ruffin.

These increased financial demands may send grandparents back into the job market, searching for ways to boost income. But with millions of people losing their jobs across the nation, older individuals may face an even harder time finding employment.

When grandparents take on the job of raising their grandchildren, it is a life-changing experience for the adults and the children. She says the adults must confront not only the financial stress but also their own conflicting emotions. "You find your own dreams and plans put on hold. You may be angry with your adult child for putting you in the situation. You also may become depressed over the enormity of the situation."

Ruffin says grandparents face a life different from their friends. "They are worrying about homework and teacher conferences, while their friends don't face the same demands."

Extension is addressing the needs of these families with Alabama RAPP—Grandparents and Relatives as Parents program. Two key goals of Alabama RAPP are to provide grandparents and relatives with information and resources to improve their parenting and develop forums where grandparents and relative caregivers exchange ideas and information.

Under Extension's Urban Affairs and New Nontraditional Programs unit guidance, Alabama RAPP has been serving these families since 2001. The program uses research-based curricula to address a number of topics that grandparents face when raising a grandchild.

Various state agencies, including the State Department of Senior Services (Area Agency on Aging), Department of Human Resources, and AARP, comprise the coalition at the state level. Based on the success of the statewide network, a number of local networks have been established using the same structure.

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