



The second time around – Grandparents Raising Grandchildren (June 2016)

BY SARAH OSTERBAUER

Jean Hayes laughs affectionately recalling a story her 15-year-old granddaughter Imani told her about one of Imani's teachers.

"She's funny!" Jean cites as one of the biggest rewards she gains from raising her granddaughter. You can sense her glowing pride through the phone as she talks about Imani. Jean and her husband Gary have had custody of Imani since she was 10 years old. Prior to that she had lived with them at various times.

Jean and Gary are part of a growing population of grandparents raising grandchildren in the United States. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 2.7 million grandparents were raising grandchildren in 2012. The Bureau also reports that 39% of them had been raising them for five years or more. The Bureau reports this change in family unit has to do primarily with longer life

expectancy (grandparents have more ability to provide care) and the fact that more households have both parents working full-time.

Unfortunately, for many families who find themselves in need of a family member (other than a parent) to take on full-time care, the events that spark the need are dire. The American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) says the reasons grandparents typically take over care is due to parents (or sometimes the children themselves) dealing with physical/mental health issues, substance abuse, addiction, incarceration or death. Whatever the initial scenario may be, the transition from grandparent to parent is not easy.

According to the AAMFT, the children may experience feelings of rejection, abandonment, anger and guilt. These feelings can manifest into behavioral problems such as defiance, anger and aggression. For Jean and Carol (Carol's name has been changed to protect her privacy), these issues are all too familiar.

Carol and her husband are raising their grandson, who has issues with substance abuse and mental illness. Once he needed more care than his mother could handle, Carol and her husband took him in.

Depending on the situation, managing and maintaining the relationship with the child's parents is an added challenge. More difficult still is that these responsibilities are put onto grandparents who thought their time as hands-on parents had ended.

Becoming a parent for a second time comes with its own challenges. In addition to obvious generational differences between the children they raised and their grandchildren, the rules of parenting changed.

As Jean said, "The rules that we had the first time did not seem to apply the second time. So it seems like we had to start over."

When they have questions about the rules, Jean says the easiest way to figure it out is to consult other parents. For her, the community has been supportive and helpful. It's been important for them to seek outside help, especially in the beginning of the transition. For Carol, the core values remained the same, but her communication style with her grandson is different than what it was with her children.

Both women and their families have seen therapists and joined support groups. The Hayes attended a group in Winona specifically for grandparents raising grandchildren, as well as taking various parenting classes.

While all these things were helpful and necessary, "Time was the most significant (factor)," Jean said. Nothing was going to happen quickly. Enough time had to pass to get into routines and acceptance mode. Imani had to accept that Jean and Gary were going to be her primary authority figures. Jean and Gary had to accept that their new primary focus was to be parents.

Part of that focus meant putting their retirement plans on hold. It also meant taking better care of themselves, both physically and mentally. Carol and her husband also started making sure they went to the doctor regularly.

Having a younger person depend on the couples means doing everything they can to ensure they will be around long enough to see their grandchildren into adulthood. Jean is confident that they will make it to the college years but has concern about Imani's future beyond that.

"If you remember your own growing up, you didn't want to leave your parents," she said. "You want to be kind of well into adulthood before you want to manage without them."

Now that the Hayes are over the hump, and the three of them feel like a family, things have gotten a lot better. As an example, Jean said, "As a threesome we're able to make decisions now about what trip we're going to take; before it was always just a fight. Now we can actually have a conversation about it, whether it's a trip or an obligation. It can be a discussion."

Both women feel the experience of raising their grandchildren has taught them a great deal, about communication, mental health and building trust. It's important to take things day by day and enjoy it when things are good, recognizing all the progress that's been made. As much as there have been struggles, they say they would not have it any other way.

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