

CHAPTER 18



KINSHIP ADOPTION



Adoption Council of Canada
Conseil d'adoption du Canada

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SOME VERY SPECIAL GRANDPARENTS
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[Photo]

Kathryn Morrow, right, is legally adopting her granddaughter Keara.

Children living with their grandparents, a widespread occurrence in some cultures, is becoming more common than ever in North America.

Some take sole care of their children's children for a temporary period.

When former U.S. President Bill Clinton's father died in a car accident three months before Bill was born, his mother left Bill with her parents in Arkansas while she went off for a few years to study nursing in New Orleans.

And current presidential candidate Barack Obama moved to Hawaii from Indonesia at the age of 10 to live with his maternal grandparents for several years.

But then there are the grandparents who wind up taking care of their grandchildren permanently.

In 2001, Statistics Canada reported that 56,700 grandparents, or one percent of all grandparents, were living with their grandchildren without either of the child's parents present a living arrangement sometimes referred to as "skip-generation households."

Two thirds of the caregivers were women; 46 percent were retired. In Montreal, the survey revealed more than 3,600 children living with their grandparents.

One local woman recently became part of that very special group.

Kathryn Morrow, 59, looks after her seven-year old granddaughter, Keara, the daughter of Morrow's oldest daughter, who is 30. Morrow also has a 22-year-old daughter who lives with her.

Seven months after Keara was born, Morrow's daughter left her abusive partner and went back to live with Morrow, who helped her daughter and grandchild get back on their feet.

The daughter went back to school and Morrow, an administrative assistant with the Laurier Teachers Union, took on some of her daughter's parenting duties.

“I was very involved in Keara’s life. I took her to the babysitter while her mother went to school. I looked after her in the summer when I had my holidays. It was very hands-on, doing baths and reading books... I was like a second mother,” says Morrow.

Her daughter and granddaughter moved out 18 months later, but the daughter soon entered another abusive relationship and by February 2005, Youth Protection became involved.

This time, Morrow stepped in for good. She decided to legally adopt her own grandchild. “I couldn’t leave Keara there anymore,” says Morrow. “This guy was a clone of the first one, only worse. He was psychologically, emotionally and physically abusive.”

Morrow knew that looking after Keara full time would change her life drastically, but says she wouldn’t have it any other way. “I couldn’t have let her go to a foster home. Never in a million years.”

Support services for foster parents are common, but Morrow’s case warranted something more fine-tuned.

“The groups, while very helpful, are not what I need because I know Keara intimately... so I don’t need social workers, and forms from the birth parents telling me what she’s like. I have that information,” she says. “It’s more support for me and what to expect. Support from peers is what I was looking for.”

Through Batshaw Youth and Social Services, she learned about a group called Cangrands, and its Montreal chapter president, Linda Turner, a Snowdon-area woman who would understand intimately what Morrow was going through.

Eight years ago, at the age of 51, Turner found herself taking care of her grandchildren full time, formally adopting her two granddaughters then aged seven and eight last year.

Cangrands is a not-for-profit Canadian association of grandparents with 25 chapters and approximately 600 members. Turner, who sought solace with them when she was going through her own turmoil, started the Montreal chapter last year. So far, more than a dozen adult members with a total of 24 grandchildren under their care have joined the local group, for many of the same reasons.

“They appreciate that I have gone the gamut already and I have adopted my [grand] children not that everybody wants to go that way [and] the fact that I have a little bit of experience,” says Turner. “We sit and really talk and encourage each other to go forward... It’s a fabulous support system.”

The group tries to meet once a month and Morrow, who first met Turner five months ago, has been to two gatherings so far. “It’s just nice to have [people] who understand. I’m the

mother but I'm not the mother. I'm not the mother but I'm doing everything that a mother would."

Morrow, whose own marriage ended almost 20 years ago, had an active lifestyle.

She is now seeing less of her female friends and also found out that among her peers, finding a babysitter is not as easy as it was when she had her own children. "Women my age don't have peers who have children, so there are no babysitting exchanges with anybody... and the other phenomenon that happened to me is I have a big network of women friends. I would say about a third of them I don't see anymore because they're not interested in having a small child at the function."

It's tough because "Wherever I go, Keara goes," Morrow says, adding that it's getting easier as her granddaughter is getting older.

As for Turner, she is only too happy to help out. "If they weren't there for me when I started out, I would have been totally lost. So this is my time to pay back."

Turner's local group is holding a celebration for Grandparents Day on Saturday, Sept. 7 at 7 p.m., 6350 Terrebonne, NDG.

For information, call 514-733-4046. For more information on Cangrands, call 613-474-0035, or visit www.cangrands.com.

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2ND GENERATION ADOPTIVE PARENTING FROM SUMMER 2008 ADOPTALK BY DIANE RIGGS, NACAC STAFF

Note: Names in the article have been changed to protect families' privacy.

Sadie was just 18 months old when Irene and Hal Benson adopted her from foster care. From the start, though, Irene's relationship with Sadie was "a roller-coaster ride." Sadie left home at 16, lived on the streets, and by 17, had given birth to a baby girl. That baby, now 10, lives with Irene through a legal guardianship arrangement. Sadie can visit her daughter when she and Irene can agree on timing, but Sadie is not, and may never be, in a position to assume full responsibility for raising her child.

For some parents who adopt children with special needs, the prospect of enjoying a leisurely retirement fades from view when their children begin to have children. Below is information gleaned from in-depth surveys and personal interviews with more than 20 adoptive families in the U.S. and Canada about some of the realities of kinship care, as well as strategies used when confronted with an unexpected return to parenting.

Challenges

One of the greatest challenges of assuming responsibility for an adopted child's child is that there is no template for how things are supposed to go. Some grandparents assume custody after social services intervene, others start by trying to co-parent but find themselves in charge when their son or daughter leaves, and still others find themselves seeking custody when a birth parent endangers the well-being of a grandchild. Just as every family is unique, so too are the dynamics in families where adoptive parents become kinship caregivers.

The first round of parenting can be very difficult—especially when children have had a traumatic start in life and join their family through adoption at an older age. Though many adopted children successfully function as adults, some will always need extra support. Most adoptive parents accept this truth, but also realize that they will gradually have more freedom as their children get older.

When a child's child suddenly needs care, the abrupt loss of long-anticipated freedom from parenting responsibilities can pose a serious emotional challenge. Compounding grief over lost leisure is the financial burden of caring for a child—an expense that can eat into retirement savings and stretch fixed incomes to their breaking point. "At my age," stated one grandparent, "I would rather be saving for my retirement than buying diapers, but this is a safety issue."



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Some grandparents even find themselves in court trying to keep a grandchild from returning to a dangerous environment. “We are near retirement age with very little left,” explained one grandmother who is trying to keep her 10-year-old grandson from being placed with his violent, drug-addicted birth father, “and the [seven-year court] battle is not yet over.”

Then there is the physical strain. Most people experience a drop in energy as they age—something made abundantly clear when they deal with small children years after their children are grown. One grandparent in his mid-60s speaks of coming home after a hard day of work, dead tired, knowing that he won’t have any down time before his eight-year-old granddaughter demands his attention. Another grandma tries to keep up with her 16-year-old grandson’s active interest in sports, without actually playing catch or shooting hoops.

Grandparents must also take care of details related to their grandchildren’s schooling and health care. Homework help, parent-teacher meetings, field trip permissions, doctor appointments, soccer practice, play dates with friends, marching band performances—the list of extra activities can seem endless. Grandparents, many of whom are still working and may be dealing with health issues, must juggle far more demands on their time, finances, and energy than most people their age.

All the time spent on caregiving limits the amount of time grandparents have to socialize with colleagues or friends. As one granddad put it, “Friends give up on you.” Suddenly kinship caregivers have significantly less in common with their same-age peers, and often cannot rely on them for support or aid.

Feelings of alienation and friction can arise within the family as roles blur. Adoptive parents cannot interact with live-in grandchildren the way they may with grandchildren whose parents are the primary caregivers. And they will have less time to be traditional grandparents to their other grandchildren. Jealousy and resentment are not uncommon—among siblings, grandchildren, and even between kinship caregivers.

Troubled birth parents can also make life stressful. As grandparents without legal custody grow more attached to their grandchild, concerns about losing her may mount. At times the birth parent may ignore the child, and then, as one grandmother wrote, “there are days she wants to be a parent and feels that we have stolen her daughter away.”

To alleviate worry about the child being removed, some grandparents seek legal custody. Others feel compelled to make the situation more permanent due to pressure from the public agency. One Canadian grandma said, “It wasn’t until the CAS threatened to adopt him out that I began to think long term.” A Minnesota couple was compelled by an aggressive out-of-state worker to assume legal guardianship of their granddaughter. “Don’t expect me to be Minnesota nice!” they remember the worker saying sharply.

Benefits

For all the hard times, most grandparents are fiercely protective of their bond with grandchildren. Nearly every grandparent interviewed remarked on the joy their grandchildren offer, and all are very attached to their young charges. “I don’t know my life without her,” said an Iowa grandfather. Others wrote, “She is my life,” “We are joined at the hip!” “...sometimes it’s a whole lot of fun!” and “...how wonderful and precious children are.”

At times, the grandparent-grandchild alliance can also help to keep the adopted birth parent tied to the family. For some, there is a much stronger impetus to visit the child’s parent in prison more often. “Our parenting of the grandchildren,” asserted another couple, “has helped keep alive the connection we had with [our daughter] ...while she has lived outside the state.”

Having lived with the devastation originating from their sons’ and daughters’ traumatic early experiences, adoptive parents have a vested interest in breaking the cycle of abusive parenting. When they see history starting to repeat itself with their grandchildren, many view it as a unique opportunity to guide the next generation from early childhood (something they may have missed with the child’s parent) to a better adulthood. And seeing grandchildren doing so much better than their parents is, as a Pennsylvania grandparent exulted, “just plain fun!”

And yes, grandparents may be a bit less energetic than they used to be, but years of wisdom can more than compensate for minor physical limitations. Grandparents commonly noted that their parenting style has evolved and improved over the years. They tend to be more flexible about the small stuff that used to drive them nuts, more protective about other matters, better versed in handling certain behaviors, and more conscious of avoiding mistakes made in years past.

For some, middle age is associated with greater financial stability—especially if the first set of children have long since left home and just one or two grandchildren come back to occupy the empty nest. Years offer perspective too. “I feel for our kids now in a bigger way since we have personally experienced foster care, kinship care, and kinship adoption,” admitted an Arkansas grandma.

In addition, though assuming care for a young child may close some social doors, it can open others. “I am not so out of place with age as I thought I would be,” reported one grandma who was surprised to find quite a few older parents at her grandchild’s school. Another rejoiced in the “many friends” she has met through her granddaughter’s school and extracurricular activities, “whom I would never have known [otherwise].”

Custody Options

The thought of turning a grandchild over to foster care is agonizing—especially for those who adopted the grandchild’s birth parent from foster care and had hoped the cycle was

broken. Fortunately, there are several custody options grandparents can use to keep grandchildren close:

Informal custody—physical custody of a child without any child welfare system involvement or parental rights—sometimes arises when an adopted daughter is still at or comes home to have the baby, when an older child asks to live with his grandparents as life at home deteriorates, or a when birth parent requests help. Agencies and workers may also divert at-risk children from foster care by giving grandparents the impossible choice of informally taking custody of the children or sentencing the children to foster care.

Jane has informal custody of her teenage grandson Jacob. When Jacob was a baby, Jane and her husband cared for him until he was one and his parents were back from military service. More recently, Jacob asked Jane to take him in because life at his mother’s house was becoming unbearable. Jane agreed to informal custody because she did not want to rock the boat with his mother. She also wanted to leave the door open for Jacob to return home anytime he chooses.

Guardianship—physical and legal custody of a child with the authority to act in place of a parent—includes court involvement, but offers grandparents some security. If the birth parent is able to parent, he or she can regain that right, but until the child is 18, the birth parent cannot resume custody without another court hearing. Guardianship also allows grandparents to enroll children in school and, in some cases, provide insurance coverage for the children through work or individual policies.

Cindy’s daughter Celeste, who has FASD, entered into an abusive relationship that resulted in two children. Eventually, Celeste kicked out the abuser and abandoned their children for a new man. Cindy assumed legal custody of the children so they wouldn’t have to re-live such a devastating loss, but for their sake, did not try to terminate her daughter’s rights. “Our daughter wanted to have some access to the kids,” she explained, “but was unable to cope with them on a daily basis.”

Joint custody—shared legal custody between two caregivers—might also be described as co-parenting. Both caregivers have the right to make medical and educational decisions for the children, as well as the responsibility to safeguard the children’s well-being.

From the time her granddaughter was born until she was nearly two, Francine at times shared parenting with her teenage daughter, Jewel, and the baby’s father, and at other times cared for the baby by herself. After Jewel broke up with the baby’s dad, he began to fight for custody. In a move that surprised everyone, the trial judge asked Jewel to share custody of the toddler with Francine instead of the birth father. Francine says that the arrangement strengthens her bond with Jewel and allows her to keep guiding her daughter (and granddaughter) to make healthy choices.

Foster care—caring for a child whose legal guardian is the state or province—affords grandparents access to government services to help meet their grandchildren’s needs, but does not offer the legal security of other types of permanence. Grandparents who are licensed as foster parents, though, can only establish ongoing physical custody of the child if workers find cause to remove the child from the birth parents and place him or her in protective custody. Without that determination, birth parents can take the child from the grandparent at will.

Belinda, a licensed foster and adoptive mother, always knew that her son Tony—who has fairly severe FASD—would not be able to effectively parent. When Tony fathered a son with a similarly needy young woman, Belinda immediately volunteered to babysit and asked the Department of Human Services to call her if a crisis warranted removal. The call finally came just after the baby’s first birthday, and Belinda was immediately able to keep him with her as a foster child, and let the department work with his parents.

Since workers intervened, Belinda was saved from being the target of negative emotions, and was not forced to make “harsh decisions” concerning the termination of parental rights. “It is one thing,” she pointed out, “to know what is right, and another to emotionally feel like you’ve betrayed your child who you know is not competent, yet is still your child.”

Adoption—legally assuming the same rights and responsibilities one would have for a child born to the family—is the most permanent option. And in certain cases, when the birth parent is completely disinterested in his or her child or actively abusing the child, adoption can become an issue of child safety and security.

Kaitlyn, who joined the Johnson family before age three, brought with her mental illness and an alphabet soup of diagnoses. When she got older, she disappeared. One day a stranger called the Johnsons to let them know Kaitlyn was pregnant. They brought her home.

After Kaitlyn took her two-week-old baby to the house of a sexual predator at midnight without any formula or other supplies, and gave other examples of parental unfitness, the Johnsons fought for custody. Four years later, the adoption was finalized. Adoption, Mrs. Johnson reasoned, “helps give the child a stable life” and keeps Kaitlyn from being able to manipulate her parents by threatening to take her son away.

For many families, however, the act of legally and permanently assuming custody of a grandchild would irreparably harm the relationship between the birth parent and adoptive parents, siblings who support the adoptive parents, and the child’s other birth parent. As one grandmother argued, “To totally change the legal complexion of the family, to do a TPR...seems very severe to me.”

Assistance Alternatives

Many foster care and adoption programs are not well-suited to the situations and needs of grandparent caregivers. “We are square pegs trying to fit into the round holes created by the system to serve families,” quipped one grandfather.

Most commonly, financial help is available to caregiving grandparents through:

- foster care
- TANF Child-Only Grants
- Social Security (for children with serious medical/mental disorders)
- Social Security Survivor Benefits (if one or both of the child’s parents are dead)
- subsidized guardianship (in some states)
- subsidized adoption (if adopting an eligible child from foster care)

Nationally in the U.S., organizations such as [AARP](#), the [National Committee of Grandparents for Children’s Rights](#), [Generations United](#), and the [Grandfamilies State Law and Policy Resource Center](#) have data about laws and policies. Local Agencies on Aging also have information concerning support services for grandparent caregivers.

Exceedingly valuable assistance also arises from conversations with other grandparent caregivers. Whether established informally or through an agency or local organization, kinship caregiver support groups (like [CANGRANDS](#) in Ontario) are a vital source of emotional comfort and social interaction. Noted one Canadian grandmother, “one needs friends who are there for you”—especially when life becomes unexpectedly challenging.

Advice

Each grandparent we interviewed had a distinct story, and members of the group had varying outcomes. Even so, several common strands of advice emerged:

Be realistic. Understand that you may need to commit 10 to 20 years to raising a grandchild. Consider how your life will change. Be honest about your physical, financial, and emotional limitations. Evaluate your partner’s commitment to see if it matches yours.

Plan ahead. Learn all you can about the child’s needs, and investigate options for respite and other support. Establish firm boundaries with birth parents who pose a risk to their children. Take steps to ensure that your child and grandchild will be safe and cared for if you are not around or become unable to parent.

Fight for your grandchildren. As one grandmother summarized, “Research and ask questions and find out what you truly believe will make a difference in this child’s life. Then run with it and enjoy every precious moment!” Others emphasized the need to “always be there [for the child] no matter what happens” and “realize that the child is innocent.”

Be open to creative solutions. So long as it is safe, keep the grandchild’s birth parent involved; have him or her drive the child to school once in a while or attend a school field

trip. Swap childcare services with other adoptive parents/ grandparents to get some time off. If you simply cannot care for grandchildren full-time, seek an open relationship with the children's foster or adoptive parents.

Work on relationships and communication. “You can't change genetics or the past,” stated one wise grandmother, “but you can work on relationships.” To protect a child's best interests, keep him connected with people who are important in his life, even if you do not agree with their choices or past actions. Visit birth dad or mom in prison, keep in touch with extended family, join forces with aunts and uncles or one of the child's favorite teachers, and keep the child in the loop and well-informed. Use family conferences to promote open communication and resolve conflicts or problems.

Take care of yourself. “You will need support,” declared one grandparent. “Try to find a support network to help you.” Another had more basic suggestions: “Take lots of vitamins, try to get lots of sleep, and recognize that you may never be an empty-nester again.”

Children adopted from care who have special needs—especially needs tied to pre-natal alcohol exposure, attachment issues, and mental health disorders—have an elevated risk of engaging in impulsive, unsafe behaviors and conceiving children before they are ready to parent. As a result, many who have adopted from the child welfare system are now part of the rising tide of kinship caregivers. For all they do to secure a better future for generations of children, we owe these and other kinship caregivers both a debt of gratitude and heightened ongoing support.



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