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GRANDPARENTING

THE JOYS AND CHALLENGES



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Contents

A A R P
A A R P
A A R P
A A R P
A A R P
A A R P
A A R P
A A R P
A A R P
A A R P
A A R P
A A R P
A A R P
A A R P
A A R P
A A R P
A A R P
A A R P
A A R P
A A R P

GRANDPARENTING

THE JOYS AND CHALLENGES

- 1 The changing image of grandma and grandpa
- 2 The joys of grandparenting
- 3 ...And the challenges
- 4 A snapshot of grandparents
- 5 Many ways to be a grandparent
- 12 Meeting the challenges of grandparenting
- 18 Getting help from AARP

This booklet is part of a series of AARP publications that provide life answers for people age 50 and over.



THE CHANGING IMAGE OF GRANDMA AND GRANDPA

You've just gotten the news. Your daughter and son-in-law are getting ready to welcome their first baby. You're thrilled, but you're also a little uneasy about being a grandparent. Frankly, the image you have of the "typical" grandparent just doesn't look like "you."

You're probably right. Today's grandparents don't always match the images we've seen portrayed in picture books and fairy tales. Most grandparents are younger and busier than they used to be. Many work full time. And very few belong to the kind of picture-perfect families that we watched on television in the 1950s.

What's a grandparent to do?

Basically, grandparents are doing what they've always done. They're loving and enjoying their grandchildren. However, they're also finding new and creative ways to be grandma and grandpa.

AARP recently conducted a survey of 1,500 AARP members who are grandparents. Since then, staff from the AARP Foundation's Grandparent Information Center (GIC) has been listening to what grandparents, grandchildren, and parents have to say about the new face of grandparenting.

This booklet contains many of the thoughts that grandparents and their families expressed during these conversations. It also contains resources that can help modern grandparents enjoy and support their families. We hope you find it useful.



THE JOYS OF GRANDPARENTING

Becoming a grandparent makes one feel “blessed,” “satisfied,” and “complete.” Many say it was “the best thing that ever happened to me.”

What’s so great about grandparenting? Here’s what grandparents are telling AARP:

- ***Grandparents enjoy seeing the cycle of life continue.*** They’re thrilled to see physical and personality traits in their grandchildren that they’ve seen in themselves, their children, and their own parents or siblings.
- ***Grandparents have time.*** They like being able to spend more quality time with their grandchildren than they sometimes had when raising their own children.
- ***Most grandparents don’t have to be parents.*** They enjoy the pure pleasure that comes from loving a grandchild without

having to be responsible for that child’s behavior, education or financial needs. Of course, many grandparents still provide financial assistance to their grandchildren. But they do it because they want to—or in response to a family emergency. They don’t do it because they have to. That, they say, makes all the difference.

Grandchildren agree. They tell AARP that their grandparents make them feel loved and special in a way that’s different than what they feel from their parents.

“A grandparent’s love is unconditional,” says one parent. “They’re going to love that kid no matter what they do.”



... AND THE CHALLENGES

Even with all its joys, grandparenting in the 21st century has its challenges.

Many grandparents worry about their grandchildren. They don't know how to protect them from drugs and alcohol. They're concerned about the unsavory influences of television and movies. They're also afraid that moral values aren't as important as they used to be.

In addition to these worries, grandparents say they face three major challenges as they carry out their grandparenting roles:

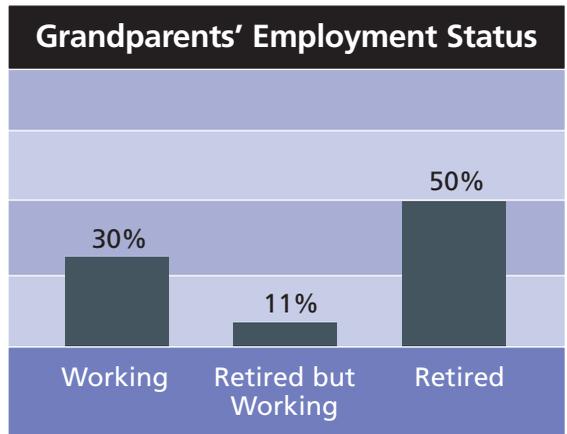
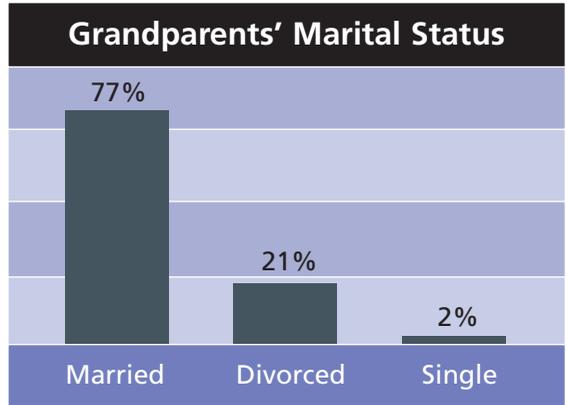
- **Distance.** Many of today's grandparents grew up living close to their grandparents. Today, more grandparents live far away. This makes it harder to have a close relationship with grandchildren.
- **Defining boundaries.** Grandparents know that the responsibility for raising grandchildren belongs to parents. Many say they learned the hard way to watch their tongues when talking to their children about their grandchildren. But knowing when to offer advice—and when to keep quiet—can still be a challenge.
- **Divorce.** Divorce of parents and grandparents can create stress for everyone in the family. Grandparents struggle to find ways to preserve their families and to support grandchildren when those families fall apart.
- **Visitation.** Some grandparents are not allowed to visit their grandchildren, usually when divorce or other family relationship issues occur.
- **Raising Grandchildren.** Millions of grandparents are responsible for grandchildren living with them.

A SNAPSHOT OF GRANDPARENTS

Here are some highlights from a recent AARP survey of members who are grandparents:

- **Many grandparents are young.** On average, AARP members welcome their first grandchild when they're only 48 years old. The average grandparent has six grandchildren.
- **Most are married.** Almost eight of every 10 grandparents (77%) are married. About one in five (21%) is divorced, widowed, or separated. Only a few grandparents (2%) are single.
- **Many grandparents work.** Three out of every 10 grandparents (30%) have not yet retired. About one in 10 (11%) is retired but still works. Half (50%) are retired and not working.
- **Grandparents are living much longer.** On average, they'll have many more years to enjoy grandparenting.

Vern L. Bengtson, in *The Journal of Marriage and the Family* (February 2001),



reports that it's more common for today's 20-year-olds to have a grandmother still living than it was for 20-year-olds in 1900 to have a mother still living. In addition, he says that over two-thirds (68%) of children born in 2000 will have all four grandparents alive when they are 18.

Resources

- To view all the results from AARP's 2002 Grandparent Study, visit www.aarp.org/grandparents, and click on Resources & Research.

MANY WAYS TO BE A GRANDPARENT

In spite of the challenges that modern families face, grandparenting is still about grandchildren.

As Eleanor Berman says in *Grandparenting ABC's, A Beginner's Handbook*, babies need special grownups “who love them, who will spend time with them; and grandparents fit the bill.”

Grandparenting is about **loving** those grandchildren, **teaching** them, **enjoying** them and **supporting** them. Dr. Arthur Kornhaber puts it simply: “This is what grandparents do.”

Dr. Kornhaber is a grandparent. He's also one of the nation's foremost experts on grandparenting. He says that to be effective, grandparents have to understand the roles they can play in a grandchild's life. Then, they must do their best to fulfill these roles.

Of course, the roles you play in your grandchild's life will grow and change, just like your grandchild. You may play certain roles throughout your grandchild's life. You'll play other roles only for a short time. Understanding these different roles can help you be a better grandparent.

On the following pages you'll find a description of many of the roles that grandparents can fulfill.



Grandparent as guardian of family traditions

My mother had three brothers, and they used to do break dancing. My grandmother tells me about them and what they used to do. It's fun to hear about that.

—Deidre, age 17

Many grandparents work hard to pass on their family's history and traditions. These grandparents often are the “glue” that holds their families together. They help grandchildren understand that they're part of something greater than themselves.

Grandparents help preserve their family's heritage by:

- Telling stories about their childhood and their grandchildren's parents' early years.
- Sharing current family news. Grandchildren want to know what aunts, uncles and cousins are up to.
- Providing a place—often their own homes—where children and grandchildren can gather and keep family traditions alive.

Try this: Create a family archive that contains report cards, news clippings, and other family treasures. Include items from your family's past. Ask family members to add new items.

Grandparent as special friend

What's the best thing about being a grandparent? Not having to act like a parent. Grandparents are glad they don't



I want them to think of me as loving. I want them to know I'll be there for them. I consider it my role to be the provider of unconditional love.

—A Miami grandmother

have to scold or criticize their grandchildren. That leaves them more time to be a grandchild's friend.

Being a special friend doesn't mean spending a lot of money. Grandparents tell AARP that they often share meals with their grandchildren. They may watch television or read a book together. Grandparents also enjoy simply talking with grandchildren about their daily activities, life at school, and deeper topics like spirituality.

Try this: Whether you live near or far, keep up with your grandchildren's daily activities. Know when they have a soccer game or an important test in school and ask about it. Let them know you care about the things that are important to them.

Whenever I would sleep over at my grandparent's house they had this huge book of bedtime stories. So they always used to read that. It was cool! –Kevin, age 14

Grandparent as teacher

Whether they are imparting lifelong values or giving hairstyling lessons, grandparents have a lot to teach their grandchildren. And grandchildren are ready to learn from these special teachers whom they love so well.

Values. Many grandparents tell AARP that they try to give their grandchildren strong moral values. Grandchildren agree. They say their grandparents have taught them good manners, respect for others, and a strong work ethic. Grandparents also teach prayers to their grandchildren, and take them to religious services.

Skills. Grandparents can teach grandchildren just about anything they know. A grandmother who came to the United States from a different country says she enjoys sharing her native language and customs with her grandchildren. Grandparents also find that their grandchildren are energetic students when it comes to learning how to garden, cook, sew, fish, play ball or even whittle.

Enriching life and learning. Not all grandparents can tutor an algebra student or help a teenager prepare for a college entrance exam. But most grandparents are good at preparing a child for a lifetime of learning. They do this by sharing with their grandchildren the joys of reading.

Three-quarters (75%) of grandparents participating in AARP's member survey say they read to their grandchildren. And many older grandchildren tell us that they enjoy reading to their grandparents.

The value of this activity can't be overestimated. Reading to grandchildren boosts their brainpower and gives them the keys to learning. The American Academy of Pediatrics says that reading to a child from the age of six months is "as important as fastening their seat belts and providing good nutrition."

Try this: When they're old enough, ask grandchildren if there's anything special they want to learn from you. Seeing you do the things you love may give them some ideas.



Grandparent as gift-giver

Sometimes they spoil me. They give me a lot of stuff that my parents won't buy me when I ask. And when I ask my grandparents, they say yes.

—Matthew, age 10

It's common for even the thriftiest grandparents to open their wallets and purses when grandchildren arrive. Grandparents shop often for their grandchildren, spending an average of \$500 on their grandchildren each year.

Certainly, many presents from grandparents include candy and toys. But grandparents also help take care of their grandchild's basic needs. More than half (52%) of the grandparents who participated in AARP's member survey spend money on a grandchild's education. Four in 10 grandparents (45%) help pay a grandchild's living expenses. One quarter (25%) pay medical bills.

If you find that you have the financial resources to set aside for a grandchild's college education, there are numerous ways to do so—some offering tax advantages.

Keeping up with my grandson, Robert, keeps me up to speed...he's already telling me that I need to check my email.

—Dave, age 61

A reminder: A grandchild's interest in a certain computer game, or the latest action figure, may have changed since the last time you talked with him or her. A brief phone call to the grandchild's parents before a shopping trip can help guarantee that you pick a current favorite and that the parents approve of the gift.

Grandparent as life-long learner

As we've seen so far, grandparents can have a big influence on their grandchildren and their families. But grandparents also can learn a great deal from their grandchildren. Grandparents say that their grandchildren have helped them:

- Be more aware of what they say and do.
- Stay healthier and more physically active.
- Stay more up-to-date on current music and fashion.
- Discover new places, like theme parks and museums.
- Learn to use computers.

Consider this: It's important to let your grandchildren teach you things. It helps you understand them a little better, and it makes them feel important. Plus, you can show your grandchild that no one is ever too old to get pleasure out of learning new things!

Grandparent as childcare provider

My mom has "flex time" at work so that she can care for my 10-month-old Katie every other Friday. Katie has bonded with my mom completely—it's truly a joy to see the thrill in Katie's eye when Grandmom is holding her, and the joy my mom takes in being with Katie. What a relief it is to be able to call on your own parent to care for your child—and to know that your child is forming a wonderful, lasting bond.

—Kristin, age 33

Your children feel many pressures as they try to raise their families and work full time. As grandparents, you can ease these pressures by helping with caregiving chores when you're needed. This helps your children. It also gives your grandchildren an important sense of stability and consistency.

The U.S. Census Bureau reports that grandparents are the most common childcare providers for children under age five. Fifteen percent of grandparents participating in AARP's member survey care for their grandchildren while their parents work, and two-thirds (66%) provide daycare during summer breaks.

Consider this: Some grandparents don't enjoy babysitting. Others may want to limit the time they spend in this role. Talk to your family about how you feel and what your boundaries are. An honest conversation early on can help prevent bad feelings later.

Resources

- The AARP Foundation's Grandparent Information Center (GIC) provides you with valuable information about giving financial and other gifts to grandchildren. The GIC also has lots of information to help you babysit or provide daycare for your grandchildren, and fun activities you can do together. Visit the GIC website at www.aarp.org/grandparents.
- For a thorough discussion of the different roles that grandparents can play in a grandchild's life, see *The Grandparent Guide* by Arthur Kornhaber, M.D. (Contemporary Books, 2002).
- Eleanor Berman's *Grandparenting ABC's* (The Berkley Publishing Group, 1998) helps to prepare new grandparents.
- A National Endowment for the Humanities website called "My History is America's History" includes a guidebook for preserving family treasures. Visit the site at www.myhistory.org.
- Veterans may wish to ask their grandchildren to help them record their wartime memories. These memories are being collected by the Library of Congress through the Veterans History Project, which AARP sponsors. Visit www.loc.gov/folklife/vets.
- Looking for fun activities that you can do with your grandchild? Visit www.igrandparents.com.
- For tips on museums you and your grandchild can enjoy together, visit www.amerimall.com/museums.html or www.museumstuff.com.
- Traveling with grandchildren can be one way to spend quality time together. Visit www.elderhostel.org or www.grandtrvl.com for information about intergenerational trips for grandparents and grandchildren. In addition, the American Automobile Association (AAA) has published a book called *AAA Traveling With Your Grandkids* (2002) as part of its Ready, Set, Travel Series. The book, by Virginia Smith Spurlock, is available in libraries and bookstores.

- The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has a wide range of information about teaching young children. Visit the association's website at www.naeyc.org/resources to find articles about raising readers, connecting children with books, and phonics.
- The American Library Association (ALA) website features reading lists and reading-related websites for kids. Visit the ALA website at www.ala.org/parents.
- The National Education Association's Read Across America website includes survey results of kids' and teachers' 100 favorite books. You'll also find tips for reading aloud. Visit the website at www.nea.org/readacross.
- *The Read Aloud Handbook* by Jim Trelease (Econo-Clad Books, 1995) offers a list of good books to read aloud to children. The book also offers many suggestions for reading to young children.
- For more information on innovative college savings programs, see www.collegesavings.org.
- U.S. Savings Bonds are a good way to give your grandchildren small gifts that will grow as they do. You can buy an EE Bond for as little as \$25, and your grandchild can watch it double in value. For information about savings bonds, visit www.savingsbonds.gov or ask about savings bonds at your local bank.
- Grandparents interested in learning computing and Internet skills might find these books helpful: *Grandma Online: A Grandmother's Guide to the Internet* (Ten Speed Press, 2001); or *For Grandmas Who Do Windows* (Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2000).
- *Your Baby and Child: From Birth to Age Five* by Penelope Leach (Knoph, 1997) is a classic guide to the different stages of a child's development.
- The Consumer Product Safety Commission (www.cpsc.gov) can help you choose safe playground equipment and help you keep up-to-date on toys and equipment that have been recalled due to safety problems.

MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF GRANDPARENTING

Every grandparent faces family issues that can't be solved easily. But with a little creativity—and lots of love—a family can usually work together to do what's best for all its members.

Grandparents say that four issues concern them most. They don't like living far away from their grandchildren; they're often unsure about how to maintain good relations with their own children and their spouses; they're struggling to keep families together when divorce is tearing them apart; and many grandparents face the challenges of stepping in to raise their grandchildren when parents can no longer do so. Here's an overview of these challenges and some tips for dealing with them.

Long-distance grandparenting

Almost half (45%) of the grandparents who participated in AARP's member survey have grandchildren who live more than 200 miles away. These long-distance grandparents say that the miles are the major reason they don't spend as much time with their grandchildren as they would like.

Distance does make it more difficult to remain close to grandchildren. But thanks to technology, long-distance grandparents can still play an active role in the lives of their grandchildren. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of AARP members who participated in the grandparents survey speak to at least one of their grandchildren on the telephone at least once a week. About a quarter (27%) send mail and almost a



My grandchildren live almost a thousand miles away from me... I don't feel part of their busy lives. Sometimes I feel like I struggle just to be noticed.
—A Denver grandparent



quarter (23%) use email to communicate with grandchildren at least once a month.

Tips for long-distance grandparents:

There are many ways to establish a connection with your grandchild, even if he or she lives far away. Try these ideas:

- Send a photo of yourself to your young grandchildren. Ask the parents to place the photo at a height where even an infant or small child can see it, or cover it in plastic so they can handle it.
- Make a tape or video recording of yourself reading stories or singing songs. Send this to your grandchildren so they become familiar with your voice. Talk to them on the phone even if they can't respond yet.
- Set up a regular time to call or exchange email notes or participate in online chats. Let grandchildren know that they can always call you—and reverse the

charges—if they want to talk. Or, give each grandchild a phone card and have him or her dial you direct.

- Find out what your grandchild is reading. By reading the same books or stories, you can engage them in conversation. They'll be thrilled that you like the same things.
- Visit when you can, or have your grandchildren visit you. In addition to conventional holidays, visit on other occasions that matter to children. Try to be on hand for birthday parties, recitals, or playoff games.

Defining boundaries

One of the most difficult things to learn is that you have to let your children make their own mistakes raising their kids. Sometimes you see them walking right into problems. But you can't say anything. You have to let them learn.

—A grandparent in Columbus, Ohio

Grandparents tell AARP that they believe the responsibility for raising their grandchildren lies with the children's parents. They also say that grandparents should support what the parent says or directs.

Unfortunately, good intentions don't always get carried into action. Grandparents may have attitudes about raising children that are different from those of their child and his or her spouse. They may disagree with how their own children speak to, discipline or feed the grandchildren. Perhaps they think that grandchildren are allowed to stay up too late or are spoiled.

Having these feelings is normal. But knowing when to voice these concerns can be tricky.

Some grandparents may be able to discuss their opinions honestly and candidly with a grandchild's parents. But if parents think a grandparent is being too critical, they may become defensive when grandparents raise issues about child rearing.

Tips for defining boundaries:

- ***Don't be critical or judgmental.***
Remember that you are not the parent, so you need to respect your children's right to raise their children as they see fit.
- ***Be flexible and keep an open mind.*** Read some current parenting books or articles. They might help you better understand your children's choices and give you ideas for constructive comments.
- ***Offer praise and positive feedback.*** Parents need to hear from you that they're doing a good job and trying hard.
- ***Be specific.*** Discuss what you and your children consider acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Your rules may be different. If you expect grandchildren to follow your rules when you're watching them, make that very clear to your children. You'll need to compromise sometimes.
- ***Put safety first.*** Although it's important to respect a parent's authority over their children, it's also important to see that they're not abused or neglected. Consult community social services and law enforcement organizations for help in these situations.



Divorce

The U.S. Census Bureau doesn't have good news about marriage. It says that about one out of every two marriages ends in divorce. To make matters worse, 60 percent of second marriages fail as well.

When parents divorce, grandparents can often be a great source of stability for their grandchildren. But even grandparents can be overwhelmed by the emotional family issues that often come with divorce. These include:

- **Visitation.** Grandparents and grandchildren can be hurt deeply if divorce and custody battles keep them from seeing one another. Most grandparents are able to work out their own visitation agreements after a divorce, death or other circumstance that breaks up a family. But some have gone to court, with mixed results, to gain the ability to see their grandchildren.
- **Grandparent divorce.** When grandparents divorce, it can shake the foundation of a family. Parents are often upset about the split, even if they understand the reason for it. Grandchildren must deal with their parents' emotions as well as their own.
- **Step-grandparenting.** Grandparents become step-grandparents when their own child marries someone with children. They can also gain step-grandchildren when they marry someone with grandchildren. Learning how to create good relationships with these new grandchildren can be challenging for grandparents and step-grandchildren.

Tips for grandparents: Kathryn and Allan Zullo, authors of *A Boomers' Guide to Grandparenting*, have these suggestions for coping with divorce:

- Focus your attention on your grandchildren, not on the parents. Offer your support and understanding.
- Be aware that your grandchildren may believe they're responsible for the breakup. Reassure the children that divorce is an adult problem that adults must solve.
- Encourage your grandchildren to express their feelings. Ask them how you can help.
- Be someone your grandchildren can count on. Phone or visit regularly. Be consistent so your grandchildren know you'll always be there.
- Don't take sides. Avoid saying something that could hurt your grandchildren's relationship with either parent or grandparent.

Grandparents raising grandchildren

I had to do it. I could not imagine that sweet baby going into a life of foster care and who knows what else.

—Grandparent raising a grandchild

The U.S. Census Bureau reports that there are 4.5 million children in the U.S. growing up in grandparent-headed households, representing more than six percent of all American children younger than 18. The

Praise your grandchildren whenever possible and build up their self-esteem. Remind them that you and their parents will always love them.

Census also reports that 2.4 million grandparents say they're responsible for most of the basic needs of one or more grandchildren living with them.

Grandparents raise their grandchildren for a variety of reasons, including an adult child's substance abuse, death, mental or physical illness, divorce or incarceration. Sometimes, grandparents step in if a parent has abused or neglected the grandchild.

The challenges of raising a grandchild are many and can be staggering. Grandparents raising grandchildren have trouble:

- Dealing with stress and staying healthy.
- Finding the money to care for their grandchild.
- Gaining and maintaining legal guardianship or custody of a grandchild.
- Coping with the physical and mental health problems of their grandchildren.
- Finding the energy to keep up with young children.
- Figuring out how to raise a grandchild and still "have a life."
- Grieving about the loss of their "traditional" grandparent role.



GETTING HELP FROM AARP

The AARP Foundation's Grandparent Information Center (GIC) provides information and referral about grandparenting for:

- Grandparents who want to play a positive role in their grandchildren's lives.
- Grandparents who are providing care for their grandchildren.
- Grandparents who are concerned about visitation with their grandchildren.

- Grandparents experiencing challenges such as long-distance, step-grandparenting, or divorce in the family.

Contact the GIC by sending an email to **gic@aarp.org**, visit them on the web at www.aarp.org/grandparents, or write the Center at the following address:

**AARP Foundation
Grandparent Information Center
601 E Street, NW
Washington, DC 20049**

Resources

- The AARP Foundation's Grandparent Information Center (GIC) provides information to help long-distance grandparents, and tips to improve communication with your grandchildren's parents. The GIC also helps grandparents who provide care for their grandchildren cope with their responsibilities by publishing a free quarterly newsletter and providing referrals to national, state and local organizations that can help. Access any GIC service by visiting www.aarp.org/grandparents or by using the contact information above.
- The Foundation for Grandparenting website (www.grandparenting.org) features a special section on long-distance grandparenting.
- *Grandparenting: Enriching Lives*, a video from Civitas, features grandparents and their families. It illustrates the countless benefits of a strong grandparent-parent-child connection and the ways in which such a connection is formed. The regular cost of the video is \$16.95. AARP members may purchase the video at the special price of \$9.95 plus shipping and handling. To order the video, call 1-312-226-6700 ext.0 or visit www.civitas.org and use the coupon code AARPGRANDS.



- For a guide to grandparenting that is written especially for baby boomers, check out *A Boomers' Guide to Grandparenting* by Kathryn and Allan Zullo (Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2004).
- *The Essential Grandparent's Guide to Divorce: Making a Difference in the Family* by Lillian Carson (Health Communications, Inc., 1999) is a guide to handling the complicated and delicate situations resulting from divorce in the family.
- The Stepfamily Foundation offers free information and counseling for families that are going through a divorce or adjusting to being a stepfamily. Visit the foundation's website at www.stepfamily.org.
- State visitation laws are changing. Grandparents experiencing difficulties should consult a lawyer in their state who specializes in family law.
- *Grandparents as Parents: A Survival Guide for Raising a Second Family* by Sylvie de Toledo and Deborah Elder Brown (Guilford Press, 1995) offers practical tips for grandparents raising grandchildren.
- *Second Time Around: Help for Grandparents Who Raise Their Children's Kids* by Joan Callander (Bookpartners, Inc. 1999) is a hands-on, how-to resource book.

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