

Relatives Raising Children

Are you a grandparent who thought you were finished with parenting full-time? Are you raising your niece, cousin, or grandchild because his mother and father are unable to? Suddenly, your life changed because a child had nowhere else to go? Do you ever wonder, “Why Me?” You are not alone. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, there are currently over 6 million children in the United States today who are living in grandparents’ or other relative-maintained households. Virginia has nearly 139,000 children living in households headed by grandparents or other relatives. Your heart goes out to this child, but now the daily responsibilities can seem overwhelming.



Where to Go from Here

You are now one of millions of primary caregivers (also known as “kinship caregivers”) who has taken a child into their home so that they may live with love and compassion, without fear of abandonment. As you move into your new role as parent, here are a few key points to remember:

Prioritize: Decide what is most important and handle that first. Do you need to get back to work to pay the bills? Then child care is primary. Don’t worry about summer child care if it’s just January; think about after school care now.

Don’t just take one day at a time; take one thing at a time: Get the children ready for school, then make your shopping list and plan for the afternoon. Plan for one event at a time.

Set limits: You will feel less anger about sacrificing your life if you don’t give up everything that is important to you. Setting rules and limits, like some private time for you or regular bedtime for the child (earlier than yours) will give you a little time here and there for yourself.

Ask for help: Look for people support. If you have supportive friends, use them. Also find other people who have gone through what you are going through. Check with your neighbors or ask your child’s teacher or doctor if they know other people in the same parenting situation. Perhaps you can find a friend or relative to trade childcare duties with for a day or a weekend, giving you a break from parenting duties. It is important to know you are not alone.

Focus on the positive: Keep in mind why you are doing this and what you have accomplished. In spite of all the stress, there are rewards.

What’s Going On Here

The new child in your home may be going through several emotions and taking them out on you. A child is rarely able to express his or her feelings in words; instead, feelings are acted out. Sometimes, the behavior doesn’t even match the feelings. Sadness or hurt may come out as anger. The child may talk back to you or teachers, act out in school or get into fights with friends. The type of misbehavior depends on the child, how much tragedy he or she has seen, and

the child's age and stage when entering your care. Nearly every child will experience the following feelings:

Grief and abandonment: A child in this situation feels rejection and a deep sense of loss. "Tender loving care" and attention from you is what he or she needs. Children also need routine and consistency in their daily lives. This helps the child to feel safe and to understand that they will not be left again. A child may blame himself or herself for the situation. Remind your child over and over that he or she is loved.

Anger: A child who cannot live with his or her parents will usually show anger toward the new caregiver, and even blame the caregiver for taking him or her away from his parent. Your new rules and limits may be resented and the child will test your patience. Anger towards you, your pets or your household is not uncommon. However, if the child is getting to the point of hurting you or others, professional help may be needed.

Fear, anxiety and insecurity: Every child has fears of some sort – fear of the dark or being lost. This child has probably experienced some very frightening real life events and will be more fearful than most. Your child may experience sleeping or eating problems. Some children become "clingy" or act "babyish." This is normal. Your time, patience and consistent love will help the child feel security and trust. You are reassuring the child with love and safety.

How to Begin

By opening your home to this child, you are providing a loving, stable place to live. You are offering familiar faces, routines and traditions that are important to your family.

Become a record keeper: Begin a notebook where you can gather all the names and telephone numbers you need to keep. These include information on doctors, school, social services and lawyers. Get medical records. Keep notes on important phone or in person conversations with any of these persons as well as dates and times. Remember, this child may be your relative but you may not have legal rights. Get professional help to guide you through the legal issues.

Take a look at financial aid: Raising a child is expensive, especially if you have not planned on it at this stage of your life. Perhaps other family members can contribute. Don't be embarrassed or hesitant to contact social services for financial assistance or medical assistance which may be available to you.

Set a clear daily routine and rules: Children feel safe when they have a consistent routine and know what is expected of them. Avoid physical punishment. Let the child know in a positive way what you want him or her to do rather than say, "Don't do that." Praise good behavior. Once you have made your rules stick to them. Be firm and fair when your child breaks the rules. Discipline works best when you are consistent.

Enroll the child in school: If your child can remain in the same school or daycare where he or she has been before coming into your care, great! If not, get the child enrolled in school as quickly as possible. This will cause much less stress for you and the child. Make sure that you talk to the teacher often about the child's progress with both studies and classmates.



There will be times when you question your decision to parent this child and need to reach out for support. Look for other families in your neighborhood or community that have taken in relatives. Call your local community center or church to see if they offer support groups or assistance. Remember, you are not alone.