



Raising The COA Grandchild

by Karen Schrock

Imagine that you are a grandparent who has assumed responsibility for raising your grandchildren. You have many issues and systems to understand: guardianship, adoption, foster care, public assistance, schools, and health care. You may have as many as four or five grandchildren, at different developmental stages. Quite frankly, you have enough going on without looking for other issues although you know the reason you have custody is because of your child's addiction.

The first time that I saw a group of grandchildren being raised by their grandparents I knew we had children affected by parental substance abuse. Our organization, Adult Well-Being Services, serves older adults in the metropolitan Detroit area of Michigan. One of our programs is for grandparents raising their grandchildren. We offer a six week education service, support groups, respite, and intergenerational groups where the grandparents and the children can improve communication. One of our newer services is a summer tutoring program. It was during one of those tutoring sessions that I identified several COAs.

Prior to coming to Adult Well-Being Services, I was director of the Michigan Office of Substance Abuse Services. We placed a significant focus on prevention of alcohol and drug use by pregnant women in order to reduce the number of

children being born affected by drugs. It was at those tutoring sessions that I was confronted with the results of our failure to eliminate drug use during pregnancy. What was even more frightening was the fact that some of my staff and most of the grandparents did not recognize the obvious physical attributes of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome or Fetal Alcohol Effects. All the signs were there if you had been trained to recognize them.

How do we help? We attempt to incorporate the services that these special families need in our services. We offer substance abuse prevention to the children and the grandparents. We refer children with developmental delays to the Children's Special Health Care Services program. We

offer respite to the grandparents. These older adults must also cope with the inconsistent presence of their adult children who have varying levels of interest in their children.

When we hear about COAs we

must keep in mind that a significant number of them are being raised by their grandparents. If we are truly committed to highlighting the needs of these children, we must include the needs of thousands of these adults across the country who have assumed this responsibility. They need and deserve our support as well. Who are some of these people? Two examples follow:

Jean, age 62, became the caregiver to her grandson due to her son's sub-

stance abuse problem. She who has multiple health problems herself, sought the assistance of Adult Well-Being Services' Grandparenting program. Through a collaboration with the National Council on Alcohol and Drug Dependence- Greater Detroit Area (a NACoA affiliate), her son began receiving treatment. The grandchild receives a variety of services through our agency including substance abuse prevention and tutoring. Both grandmother and grandson participate in monthly Grandparent Support Groups and bi-monthly Family Support Groups. All of this has helped her meet the demands of parenting her COA grandson.

Willie, age 57, is legal guardian to her four grandchildren, ranging in age from 8 to 14. She is still working as a bus attendant with the Detroit Public Schools, and plans to retire this year. Her daughter could not raise the children because of her drug problem. Willie expressed the concerns of many who assume this responsibility: she says that if she didn't take them they would go to foster care. She says when she is feeling overwhelmed, she attends our weekly support groups for grandparents raising grandchildren where participants socialize, share ideas and support each other. These grandparents are not just raising grandchildren, they are also dealing with their own adult children who are often creating a fair amount of instability in the family.

The above stories put a human face on what happens when addicted people drop off their babies with Mama.

Karen Schrock is the director of the Adult Well-Being Services in Detroit, Michigan, and the former director of the Michigan Office of Substance Abuse Services.

"...I was confronted with the results of our failure to eliminate drug use during pregnancy."
