

# Grandparents as lifesavers

**I**f I had known how much fun it is to be a grandmother (grandfather), I would've had my grandkids first!"

We've all heard that comment, usually delivered with a twinkle of the eye and a joyful face. "Kvelling" is the Yiddish phrase, swelling with pride.

Grandparents traditionally enrich family life in important ways. They are role models and mentors, cheerleaders, supporters, teachers and guides, those kindly people who slip you a quarter when you're pint-sized, and an extra \$20 for gas money or an indispensable new tube of lipstick. They dry tears and shout themselves hoarse at the soccer game.

But what happens when grandparents become primary caregivers for their grandchildren? This phenomenon is on the rise, so much so that the Massachusetts Legislature and Governor Deval Patrick created in 2008 the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Grandparents Raising Grandchildren.

With that, the commonwealth acknowledged that grandparents thrust into the role of raising their grandchildren often need particular kinds of support. The new commission was charged with holding listening sessions



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around the state and making program and policy recommendations, many of these now implemented.

The Barnstable Senior Center recently conducted a study to learn what the huge "Baby Boomer" generation wants of their senior center. One issue identified was the increasing numbers of grandparents who need support groups, legal advice and other assistance for raising their grandchildren.

Grandparents become primary caregivers for many reasons. Adult children become unable to raise their own children because of drug abuse, alcoholism, mental illness, incarceration, military service, serious illness or death, divorce or financial crisis. Often multiple reasons are in play. Judge Joseph Rardon (now retired) saw many such cases through his work in criminal court, and he is convinced that mental illness is often the root cause for drug addiction or alcoholism.

Whatever the reasons, grandparents may be in "double jeopardy" — they take over child-rearing duties even at an advanced age, sometimes managing illness or infirmity of their own, and also coping with shame, grief or fear that can arise when adult children become incapable of child care.

Legal advice is essential. Some try to obtain legal custody of their grandchildren through the courts, but are not eligible for legal assistance as the parents would be.

Some try to "fly under the radar" as one expert put it, out of fear the children will be taken from them.

Others realize their health makes it impossible to care for young children, so they must find other family members who could take the children.

No question about it, this can be traumatic for all involved. Grandparents, parents and the children can all become deeply wounded. Kerry Bickford, of the Cape Cod Cooperative Extension, serves on the commission, and says providing needed support is essential if the trauma is to be contained instead of passed along, generation to generation.

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## GRANDPARENTS

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If you know a grandparent raising grandchildren in your neighborhood, your church, or your job — be a friend. Take the kids for an afternoon, offer to bring over a pizza or just be a willing ear and shoulder, with compassion and no judgment.

If you are the grandparent

raising grandchildren, know that you don't need to do this alone. The commission's website, at [www.massgrg.com](http://www.massgrg.com), offers a wealth of information on legal options, available services and advice on social, psychological and financial issues.

Being a grandparent shouldn't have to hurt. We all have a stake in raising healthy children.