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University of Maine Center on Aging

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# Maine Parenting Relatives Mental Health and Substance Abuse Project

*A Generations United-Funded Project*

## Article Series # 3

### **A Grandmother Describes Her Adjustment to Parenting Her Grandchildren**

*Anonymous*

I came home from an out of town work trip and there was my husband holding two dirty children. There were two trash bags of dirty children's clothes and toys on the floor. I felt immense relief that these two little boys were safe after our many months of worrying about them. Then I started screaming, "Where are their parents? What have they done? What has happened?" My angry words upset the children and they began to cry. I immediately calmed myself down. I held the baby to comfort him. I decided the best thing I could do was be silent. I held him and rocked him as emotions and confusion flooded over me. My husband looked exhausted sad and angry. We struggled together to bathe the children, feed them, and get them to bed. We talked and cried long into the night.

The next day I called my employer to say I couldn't come in. He informed me that yes, there is a family leave law, but if I wanted to retain my current position, he would only give me three days off to arrange childcare. The oldest child was crying and asking, "Where are Mommy and Daddy?" He needed comforting yet I was on the phone. I was trying to find someone to take care of him and his baby brother. My husband was out shopping for formula, baby food, and diapers. I was trying to keep my own emotions in check for the sake of the children. I felt intense anger at the parents and at the system that had been so slow to protect these precious little ones. My husband came home, the children napped and we discussed, "What are we going to do?"

There seemed to be no map for our journey. We knew of no one else who had gone through this. We felt tremendous anxiety and confusion. We called a lawyer for ourselves and then learned there was a guardian ad litem to protect the children. In addition to the stress of full-time parenting again, we were faced with dealing with the Department of Human Services and the legal system, court, and lawyers.

Hardest of all, we were faced with dealing with our daughter and her husband. They were begging to have the children back and promising to straighten out their lives. They started blaming us for their problems. Our daughter told us what horrible parents we had always been and how if we had helped her more she wouldn't have lost custody of the children. "You should be helping ME not the kids!" She shouted at me. It seemed every phone call and face-to-face visit with

her was a nightmare. My encounters with her would leave me exhausted, sad, angry and confused. "Had I betrayed her?" I asked myself. I started to think of all my inadequacies as a mother and wondered if I could parent these two needy and hurt grandchildren. I increasingly guilty yet I wasn't sure what the guilt was all about.

Here we were in our mid fifties, working full time, and now faced caring for a baby and toddler. We were getting up two hours earlier every morning in order to dress and feed the children, get them to daycare, get to work on time. I began to dread picking the children up after work. It seemed both would start crying as soon as I arrived to pick them up. They were needy and demanding. I felt guilty that I had left them all day knowing that they needed so much time and attention. We struggled through supper taking turns cooking and entertaining our two little ones. We were really concerned about the behaviors of the older child. He had been so sweet and now he was angry and defiant. "Grammy you used to be my best friend. Now you are mean and I hate you! Leave me alone. I want my Mommy back!" I started feeling angry with him because I had given up my free time to care for him. I was angry with the parents who did not seem to be turning their lives around. It seemed they were enjoying their freedom while I was caring for their kids. I was angry with my husband for not doing more housework. Little annoyances began to add up – "Why was he reading the paper while I did endless loads of laundry?"

Considering myself a very strong person, I started feeling like my whole life was unraveling. I felt overwhelmed and exhausted. My husband and I were constantly bickering over household chores. We had endless discussion about the future, our retirement, our daughter's future, and the grandchildren's future. We worried about money. We were putting less money into our retirement funds. We worried we might have to raise the boys until they grew up. Everything seemed uncertain. Would we be raising these children or would the parents get their act together and take them back? Our hopes went up and down as they made progress and then fell backwards. It was a long and emotionally draining cycle.

We were increasingly concerned about the children. The oldest child was getting worse and not better. He was angry and defiant. Our sleep suffered because he refused to go to bed or he was up most of the night with nightmares. The baby was not moving or making sounds, as he should. Now we were taking time off from work to take our little boys to doctor appointments, evaluations, physical therapy, and counseling appointments. My boss was angry at my requests for time off and told me I had to do something about this. He said I was disrupting the whole department. I felt more and more guilty about the children and the time I spent away from them working.

We began to feel very isolated. We knew no one else in this predicament. We no longer had time to socialize with friends. We gave up on going to church on Sundays because it seemed like too much work to get us all going. We wanted

to go out but couldn't find a baby sitter that could manage the behaviors of the oldest child. I began to feel my friends and relatives just could not understand what I was going through. Their advice was unhelpful. MY sisters told me, "You are a saint BUT...you would be crazy to raise those boys. MY mother was angry that I had rescued my daughter and son-in-law yet again. While my sister said I was a saint, she said I was a darned fool and should have sent the kids to foster care. Then our youngest daughter came home from college. I was amazed that she was jealous of the children. She was upset that the children were in "her" room and she had to sleep in the small back bedroom. "You are always bailing HER out...you are now taking care of HER kids... I wished you helped ME like you help my sister...I'm the one working my butt off to go to college and they get all the help! Her anger and jealousy made me feel guilty. She did not stay the full spring break with us and left the house with more angry words. Here was something else to add to my feelings of guilt.

I felt overwhelmingly tired and feelings of depression were settling in. My days started out with a dark cloud of depression hanging over me as I turned off the alarm and headed for the shower.

### **Finding Help and Support**

Not knowing what to do, we turned to the boys' service providers for support. We learned that they were there to help the children and their focus was on the boys' needs. One person persistently advised me to get through work and become a full time mother. "These boys are so needy and demanding they deserve someone who can stay home with them." Another layer of guilt was added to my burden and I didn't seem to be getting any help with managing all this. We had a kid in college, a re-mortgaged house and resigning my position was not an option financially. I was exhausted and would have liked to work fewer hours but that was not an acceptable alternative with my boss.

Another person providing services was very critical of our involvement with our daughter and her husband. We felt torn between the boys' huge needs and our concerns for helping our daughter get her life together. "You need to focus on your grandsons. She doesn't deserve any help. She is an adult who has made many bad choices." A tiny voice in my heart said, "But I still love her despite her mistakes. I love her as much as I love these grandsons." At a team meeting there were discussions about our not seeing the picture clearly.

I became angry and defensive asking; "Does anyone think about the whole picture, the whole family and not just the kids? Does anyone here see the whole picture?"

Then in a chaotic morning we had an accident. The baby was sick and we gave him chewable aspirin. I didn't put it back in the cupboard and I neglected to put

the childproof cap on tightly. A few minutes later we noticed our older boy Sonny sitting behind a chair eating something. The baby aspirin bottle was nearly empty. I had Ipecac in the cupboard and gave it to him while my husband talked to the doctor. Sonny vomited profusely and this accident did not become a tragedy. I left for work feeling shaken and my husband stayed home with the children.

At noon when I picked up the office phone, an icy voice asked, "Where are you? We had a meeting at 12:00." I had reluctantly agreed to go to a meeting during my noon break. Now I had forgotten it! "Oh no, I have accumulated another black mark on our record." The mental health provider said she would come to my office instead because some papers needed to be signed. A few minutes later, she appeared and I told her about our terrible morning. I was hoping for sympathy and support. Instead, she berated me for my carelessness and not locking up the medicine. She talked about sending the boys "to a foster home with a full-time mother." I reached my lowest point. I started sobbing and I couldn't stop. I already felt guilty and upset about the incident. Her harsh words made me feel ashamed and incompetent. I felt we could never meet the expectations of the team of helpers. All the pain for the whole family, for us, for the children, for my daughter seemed to be wrapped into a huge ball of suffering and unexpressed emotion. I hardly remember how the meeting with this "helper" ended. I do remember worrying for days afterward that she would go back to the agency and report my emotional instability.

It was a turning point for us. We decided we would ask the DHS worker if we could get services from another agency. We decided to talk to a counselor for just ourselves and not tell anyone where we were going for services nor sign a release. We needed someone on our team. Enough of the child-focused team that saw only the needs of the children and could not see how helping and supporting us also help the children. The person we chose to see was wise and wonderful. He seemed to understand how hard we were trying and how difficult the boys were. We pointed out how some of Sonny's behaviors were beyond our control. With his encouragement, we made the decision to avoid or limit time with relatives and friends who were critical or offered unsolicited and unhelpful advice. We made decisions to take better care of ourselves. We decided to take two strollers and go for walks after supper at night. We started taking advantage of once a month respite that was offered. MY husband decided to adjust his hours in a way that would meet some of the children's demands. We worked on our relationship with our daughter. We learned about setting limits with love rather than setting limits out of anger. I changed jobs and my husband decided to retire early and be "Mr. Mom."

Then another crisis occurred and the oldest boy was hospitalized in a psychiatric unit. We were devastated to see our six-year-old locked up and away from us. However, the staff at the hospital took a family approach to Sonny's problems. They involved us in his treatment and we were frequent visitors during his

hospitalization. After the hospitalization, we were connected with a woman who saw Sonny with the both of us. We were given understanding about how difficult and exhausting it was caring for two little boys who needed so much. She made a visit to our home to meet the younger boy and see his delays and the struggles we were having with him.

I wish I could tell you that it all had a happy ending. There were many more painful challenges along the way and both boys turned out to have significant disabilities as a result of their mother's drug use during pregnancy and the neglect they suffered in their parents' care. Our hope that our daughter would get better and take the children back never happened. She was eventually incarcerated for drug trafficking and has not had contact with her children for several years. Now a few years later we are stronger, wiser, and very committed to the welfare of these two growing boys.

Someone asked me, "What would you tell another grandparent about what helped and didn't help?" I would say if you encounter a professional helper, who is judgmental and critical, run out the door and find someone who understands your situation. Find someone who understands that the whole family needs help not just the children. Most of all take care of YOU. Give yourself a break and take advantage of respite. Find other grandparents who are raising their grandkids. There are now 6 million grandparents raising their grandchildren and many communities have support groups. No matter how exhausted you are, find and connect with that support group. Through our grandparent support group, we have made good friends and enjoyed the social opportunities and events. Our boys were happy to find other children being raised by their grandparents and to know they were not alone. The isolation before we joined the group was awful. Together we have shared tears, tragedies and sadness and we have laughed and celebrated our achievements doing this hard job. Use the Internet and find all those wonderful resources that are available. Put the word "kinship care" or "grandparents" in the search box. If you don't have your own computer go to your local library or go to your grandkids' school library and have the librarian help you. Most of all take good care of YOU. Make taking care of yourself a priority so you can take care of those little tykes or those rowdy teen-agers. Be good to yourself like you would be good to a special friend. It is a long day when you are raising children for the second time around. And don't forget to take a nap.

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