

Issues for grandparents

If you suspect your daughter's husband or partner is an abuser

At first, you may feel that it is not your place to do anything, that it is your daughter's responsibility to protect her children. Your suspicions may not be based on anything definite, perhaps just a few odd things your grandchildren have said, or perhaps something you've noticed that is unusual, or perhaps just a feeling that all is not well. You might be angry at her for being ambivalent about protecting her children. You might be angry because she is still attached to the father or boyfriend that you suspect. You might think that perhaps she doesn't choose her men very well. These are all normal feelings to have.

As a Grandparent, there are torn loyalties if you suspect something is wrong. On the one hand, you love your daughter and do not want to upset her. On the other hand, you love your grandchildren and do not want to stand by if they are being hurt. Overall, you just want things to be all right again. You are not talking about wanting custody or removing them from the family home, you just want the situation to be better. Because of this, you may not want to report your suspicions to the authorities. If you are in this position, ring a CASA and ask to speak to the duty worker to discuss your concerns.

If you suspect your son is the abuser

As the parent of the suspected abuser, your loyalties are tested even more. You are faced with the choice of watching your grandchildren being hurt, or reporting your son to the authorities. It is a very difficult situation.

If, for instance, your son is reported and charged, your daughter-in-law may be very angry with you and not want you to see her children because the perpetrator was your son. These are children you used to spend time with and now you are denied access completely. The sorts of things you hear might be; "How did you bring your son up? Where did he learn this behavior? I don't want my children to have anything to do with your family."

Some grandparents try to cope with the guilt by believing that their son was not responsible for his actions – that he was led astray by his wife or someone else. Others believe that their son is innocent. It is very hard to accept that your son has done this to your grandchildren.

Custody and access

Grandparents do have rights. The family law act says that a child has a right to see anybody who is a significant person in their life. Grandparents have a right under the family law act to apply for access to a child who sees them as very much a part of their life. Going to court is a difficult business however, and is usually a last resort.

There are circumstances when the Department of Human Services may place children with the grandparents. This puts Grandparents in the middle of the family crisis and raises a whole range of issues. Some of these can be:

Guilt

If you are caring for your grandchildren, your old life is gone. You might have been involved in golf or your bingo nights or a social life with your friends, and suddenly you have these children to care for and they have to come first. It's a different life. Given the choice, who wouldn't want to just be able to see them on Sundays? Who wants to have hassles with schools, and getting them to tidy their bedrooms, and having to do all the washing? After all you have already raised your kids. Even thinking like this makes grandparents feel guilty, but they have every right to. It is a thankless task, and small children particularly have no concept of how hard it is for their grandparents to look after them. They have no idea of the emotional turmoil suddenly thrust upon you. You may also begin to doubt your own parenting skills and feel guilty because you are now the parent of a 'sex offender'.

Anger

You may feel angry with the authorities for assuming that you will automatically take on the care of these children, or for even putting you in the position where you must make a decision about it. You may be angry with your daughter or son because you are now supporting their children. You may also be getting a fair amount of flack from the rest of the family for doing it. The family may think that the daughter should have the kids. At other times the family might feel that the daughter should never see the kids again. Either way, custodial grandparents are stuck in the middle.

Age hurdles

Given their age, custodial grandparents often find it difficult to physically cope. It is difficult for them to pick up after children all day. They are not as mobile or supple as younger people and usually find themselves constantly exhausted. Often there are child management problems too. Because they were born in a different era, and were parents in a different era, what they believe is appropriate child care when they brought up their own kids is often no longer considered appropriate child care now. For instance, they grew up in an era where a short sharp smack on the bottom is what you got if you did something naughty. That is no longer seen as appropriate discipline. Grandparents may feel that they are out of their depth when confronted by issues of the day.

When Grandfather is the abuser

When Grandfather is the abuser, it is devastating for the Grandmother. She is forced to re-evaluate her relationship with her husband and her thoughts of him at a time in her life when she just wants things to be peaceful. She is often very attached to him after all this time, yet she may also be dearly attached to her grandchildren. She will be feeling like she doesn't know which way to turn.

If Grandfather is either not reported or is left on parole in the home

If Grandfather is staying in the home, Grandmother is faced with very difficult decisions. Should she get a divorce or separate? At 70 this is very hard. The alternative may be not seeing her grandchildren as they are no longer allowed to come to the house if grandfather is there. Grandmother will be expected to take sides, however not everyone will be happy.

If Grandmother chooses to stay with her husband, there is a lot of spoken or unspoken animosity in the family about her husband or 'granddad'. The daughter or daughter-in-law is usually very angry, and so often she will deny Grandmother any access to the children in retaliation. Often other members of the family won't take their children to see the grandparents either, so that no grandchildren visit the house. If grandmother still wants to see any of her grandchildren, she is the one who has to do all the visiting. This can be very difficult if she's a bit immobile or has transport difficulties or is simply emotionally exhausted.

If Grandfather is charged and jailed.

Learning to live by yourself after all this time is very difficult to cope with. This is not a time when it's easy to move and re-establish yourself somewhere else either. You have a routine with shops you go to, you have come to know the shopkeepers and people you see. You tend to go to the closest shops and know people in the street because you have spent a lot of time getting to know them. Because of this, there may be a lot of embarrassment that everyone around you 'knows' about your husband. You may have relied on your husband to maintain the household or financial affairs, a task that is both daunting and frightening to you. You may now feel unsafe living alone in the house, and have difficulty sleeping.

Where to get help

When things are not clear cut you may feel like you have nowhere to go, no-one to speak to or no-one to trust. You want to do what is right for your grandchildren and their welfare. It's not easy, but in situations like this, ring a CASA and ask to speak with the duty worker. They will listen, offer information and explore choices with you. You can be anonymous if you wish.

Grandparent issues and counselling

Counsellors are trained to see issues from many perspectives. Sometimes people feel uncomfortable at first if their counsellor is much different to them in age, but it is worth persisting. Sometime the most rewarding counsellor/client relationships can be formed between people of vastly differing ages. Give it a go!

SECASA sometimes runs groups for grandparents. Please ring SECASA on (03) 9928 8741 if you are interested in participating in a support or information group like this.