

Kinship Care

Raising the child of a relative involves unique challenges best met by applying gospel principles.

By Jacci Graham, Licensed Clinical Social Worker,
and Jeremy Yorgason, Associate Professor of Family Life at
Brigham Young University

When one of Dorothy's sons fathered a child out of wedlock, her life took an unexpected turn. Initially, Dorothy (names have been changed) took care of her granddaughter only occasionally. However, as time went on, Dorothy's granddaughter began staying with her more and more frequently, and eventually, Dorothy gained legal custody of the girl. For Dorothy, the situation was difficult physically, financially, and emotionally, and her granddaughter faced the personal challenges resulting from living in an abusive home, then being thrust into a new environment.

Dorothy's story represents a growing trend within and without the Church: people are raising grandchildren or other young relatives. In the United States, relatives are raising more than 2.5 million children because their parents, for a variety of reasons, cannot.

Relatives who accept the responsibility of being a guardian and nurturer can be a great blessing to the children they welcome into their homes. Children in what is often called "kinship care" typically have fewer behavioral problems, have a greater sense of stability, and are more likely to report that they "always felt loved" than children in non-relative foster care or group homes.¹

However, relatives who assume this parental role also face many challenges. The following suggestions can help

caregivers and children manage these challenges through applying gospel principles.

Foster Habits of Love

Families like Dorothy and her granddaughter can study "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" and discover truths such as, "Happiness in family life is most likely to be achieved when founded upon the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ."²

Focusing on loving the children and teaching them to understand and live by gospel truths will help them develop habits of righteous living. Some of the most important habits are family scripture study and prayer, church attendance, and regular family home evenings. In addition, families benefit by spending regular time together, such as family dinnertime.

Citing various authorities, Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has taught: "The time a family spends together 'eating meals at home [is] the strongest predictor of children's academic achievement and psychological adjustment.' Family mealtimes have also been shown to be a strong bulwark against children's smoking, drinking, or using drugs. There is inspired wisdom in this advice to parents: what your children really want for dinner is you."³



Other positive methods of helping a child foster a sense of self-worth and mature in a healthy way include giving praise, modeling positive behaviors, and implementing appropriate discipline.

Establish Roles

One of the greatest challenges faced by kinship caregivers is establishing appropriate roles. For example, grandparents who care for their children's children often struggle to find balance between being a fun-loving grandparent and being a responsibility-bearing parent. When Dorothy gained custody of her granddaughter, for a number of years they enjoyed an easy, friend-like relationship. However, as the granddaughter reached her early teen years, she developed a less cooperative attitude while trying to cope with the challenges of her past. Dorothy struggled with how to foster a positive relationship and simultaneously establish rules and enforce consequences.

Establishing rules can be difficult, but children need structure and boundaries to have the sense of stability necessary for emotional health. Dorothy and her granddaughter eventually joined the Church. They found that applying gospel principles improved their relationship in meaningful ways. Their challenges did not disappear, but they found guidance and support during difficult times.

Talk about the Parents

Children who, for reasons not of their own making, find themselves being raised by a non-parent relative may mistakenly blame themselves for their situation. One reason this happens is that caregivers sometimes do not explain to the child why he is not able to live with his parents. Caregivers may feel embarrassed or worry that the child will think poorly of the parents.

One of the most successful ways kinship caregivers can help children is to talk carefully with them about why they are being raised by a relative instead of their parents. Children who understand this are more likely to feel safe. Moreover, both the caregiver and the child are less likely



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to blame themselves or feel a sense of shame. Prudence regarding the child's age and maturity must be exercised when weighing how much to reveal and how soon.

Being honest and positive about the children's parents will help maintain family ties and prevent the anger, frustration, and feelings of betrayal that often hinder healthy relationships.

Assess Emotional Strain

Many children come to their extended families with emotional wounds from abuse or chronic neglect. Children's emotional trauma may lead them to act out in school, push the limits of rules they are given, and question the love that others show them. They may experience feelings of loss and struggle with attachment as they try to cope with new living situations. In these circumstances, caregivers can provide an environment of stability, encouragement, and love for children. Caregivers also may want to consider seeking professional mental health services for the child.

Caregivers themselves often experience emotional strain, frustration, or even anger as they try to integrate a child into a new home. Most caregivers who assume guardianship for a child did not expect this responsibility but

accepted it when asked. Many resume the parental role long after their own children have grown. They may question whether they are capable of parenting again.

Caregivers may benefit by refreshing their parenting skills (particularly discipline and problem-solving techniques) through books, Internet resources, and classes. Caregivers may also want to learn about age-appropriate behaviors so that they know what to expect of the children they care for. Studying the challenges the children may face—including emotional disorders, grieving the loss of parents, drug use, and behavior problems—will make supporting the child easier.

Address Social and Physical Challenges

Older caregivers often say they don't relate well with the children in their care because of the vast age difference. Additionally, they find they no longer have the energy or strength to deal with these new challenges. Some feel lonely or isolated. Others describe frustration at not being physically able to do what they want or need to do to rear the child. In both cases, developing a strong network of emotional and practical support from neighbors and ward members can be immensely helpful. Caregivers may find others in similar circumstances and develop a social network. Ward leadership and home and visiting teachers also can provide needed assistance.

Consider Financial Issues

Becoming a caregiver involves financial considerations. Alice was 84 when she adopted her great-granddaughter Julie. Several months later, Alice's husband died and she was left to raise Julie on her own. Alice knew that she would be physically and financially unable to care for her great-granddaughter by herself, so she sought the help of her sister Helen. At age 70, Helen moved in with Alice and went back to work as a respiratory therapist to help defray the costs associated with raising a child. After several years, both of Julie's siblings came to live with Alice and Helen, who together established a system of work distribution

that allowed them to care for three young children.

Alice and Helen found a creative solution to the question of how to afford raising children at an advanced age. In most cases, caregivers are not financially prepared for their new responsibility. In all cases, continuing to follow the counsel of Church leaders will increase the likelihood of success.

For instance, all caregivers can observe this counsel from Elder Robert D. Hales of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles: "To provide providently, we must practice the principles of provident living: joyfully living within our means, being content with what we have, avoiding excessive debt, and diligently saving and preparing for rainy-day emergencies. When we live providently, we can provide for ourselves and our families and also follow the Savior's example to serve and bless others."⁴

Local priesthood leaders can also offer counsel. In addition, many areas have government and community-sponsored programs designed to help caregivers raise children in their charge. These programs help caregivers address the challenges associated with the cost of education, food, and even medical care.

Counsel with the Lord

As in all things, caregivers can seek the counsel of the Lord. Regular temple attendance and prayer can help provide clarity for the many difficult decisions that both caregivers and children face. As they find answers through proactive searching of available resources and heed guidance from the Spirit, relative caregivers can be a powerful influence for good in the lives of children. They can be the means of teaching the children in their care "to love and serve one another, observe the commandments of God, and be law-abiding citizens wherever they live."⁵ ■

NOTES

1. See Tiffany Conway and Rutledge Q. Hutson, "Is Kinship Care Good for Kids?" (fact sheet, Center for Law and Social Policy, Mar. 2, 2007), 1–2, clasp.org.
2. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," *Ensign*, Nov. 2010, 129.
3. Dallin H. Oaks, "Good, Better, Best," *Ensign*, Nov. 2007, 106.
4. Robert D. Hales, "Becoming Provident Providers Temporally and Spiritually," *Ensign*, May 2009, 8.
5. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," 129.