

Grandfamilies: Raising children for a second time

Raising children is tough. Even the most seasoned experts get stumped at times.

When people find themselves in need of a sounding board, someone in a similar situation who can listen to their concerns, empathize with their experience and offer words of encouragement or wisdom can make a big difference.

Once a month, Lillie Robinson, 76, attends a virtual "Grandparents and Other Relatives Raising Children Support Group" organized by Pathlights. "By participating, I get to meet other grandparents who are taking care of grandkids," she says. "Maybe one of them is looking for help or going through something and I might have information for them." She recently told a grandparent who ran out of food about a food pantry located near her home.

The support group's facilitator, Meghan Mitoraj, a caregiver specialist with Pathlights, opens with asking the group how everything is going and gives everyone a chance to share the joys and challenges they're facing.

"There are three parts to the program," Mitoraj explains. "A monthly support group that meets on Zoom, counseling by phone if grandparents have questions or need to ask about different resources, and gap-filling funds." She sees a variety of unique opportunities and challenges among participants:



grandparents bring experience and often more patience but may have health issues and less energy to keep up with young children; sometimes there are problems with discipline; adapting to school changes, such as technology and e-learning that didn't exist when they were raising kids; and limited finances as they age on a fixed income. Pathlights can help meet needs by offering home-delivered meals, homemaker services and a benefits and advocacy department to assist with information and applications for cost-saving programs.

Robinson raised six kids in the 1980s practically on her own and a granddaughter Michaela in the 1990s, now a proud mother herself, while working full-time as a medical assistant. But

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– Lillie Robinson

this time around is different given she is older and a retired empty-nester. She began raising granddaughters Zaelynn, 14, when she was four weeks old and Zariyah, 10, at a year old.

"I haven't been in school for more than 60 years and things have changed," she says, referring to new math and technology. "Their teachers tell them if there's anything they don't understand, they'll help them with it." Fortunately, they can also turn to the many teachers in the family for assistance.

Life is full and busy. Robinson says she has a routine down. She wakes them up for school. While they take showers and get dressed, she makes breakfast. Once they've eaten, she drops them



off at their respective schools—Zaelynn is in high school and Zariyah, middle school. If she doesn't have a doctor's appointment, she does the wash, dishes and chores around the house before school pick-up. Once home, she lets them relax for an hour. Then they do homework, exercise – jumping jacks, squats, leg exercises and the treadmill – and read the Bible. By 6:30 p.m., the girls are free to do whatever they want until bedtime at 10 p.m. and most nights, they enjoy "sister time" that includes playing games and watching movies together. On Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, they skip exercise and bible time for piano class and band. If they didn't switch up the routine, it would delay dinner and Robinson prefers they eat early. Weekends are more relaxed. They spend Friday nights and Saturday afternoons with their mom. On Sundays, they attend religious school and church, where they're known as the "Z sisters," and discuss what they learned afterward with Robinson.

Overwhelmed with gratitude, she has sent many thank you notes to Pathlights for paying the light and gas bills. Buying the family food and school supplies. Setting her up with an emergency alert button she wears around her neck for calling for help in case she falls – as she did recently – and arranging for a Home Care Aide to occasionally assist with light housekeeping and chores. "They do everything we need and if they don't have it, they will tell us where we can get help," Robinson says.

The assistance allows her to focus on what she does best: "I get to provide them with 76 years of wisdom," she says of raising her granddaughters. "I tell them things I didn't learn as a child that I've learned as I've gotten older. How to be respectful and nice to everyone always. Say excuse me when you're passing by people."

From waiting outside the door during piano class and band to joining them in their exercise routine at home, she loves being involved in their daily activities.

"I just enjoy these girls," she says. "Besides God, these girls are my life. I don't do anything or go anywhere without them."

Are you an older adult who is the primary caregiver for a grandchild or other family member under 18? We offer community resources for these caregivers – providing free consultation, education, encouragement, and, in some cases, emergency funding. Call 708-361-0219 to schedule a one-on-one appointment to learn more.

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

More than 2.4 million grandparents are householders responsible for children living with them.



69% are married



56% are in the workforce



46% are age 60 or over



45% have been caring for a grandchild for 5 or more years



37% have no parents of the grandchildren present in the home



25% have a disability

All data points are cited in the full 2022 State of Grandfamilies report, "Together at the Table: Supporting the Nutrition, Health and Well-Being of Grandfamilies." It is available from Generations United at www.gu.org

