Being a grandparent is a role that many older adults will enjoy sooner or later. Grandparents are a diverse group, healthier and more active than previous generations—perhaps found wearing blue jeans, throwing a baseball to their grandchildren, or involved in their own careers. With time, the picture often changes. Grandparenting is a dynamic role.

Most grandparents, at least those in developed countries, describe their relationships with grandchildren as close, warm, and rewarding. It is a different role than parenting, and becoming a grandparent alters the relationship with one’s own children, others’ perceptions of one, and one’s own self-views. Grandparenting requires an open mind and a willingness to adapt to changing family relationships, children’s interests, and communication styles.

In recent years, more grandparents have become the custodial guardians of their grandchildren because the parents become unable to provide the care these children require, perhaps through teenage pregnancy, divorce, unemployment, prison time, addictions, and other reasons. Grandparents can be perceived as the solution to a crisis occurring with the biological parent(s) when few other options are desirable or even exist. Grandparents assume parental responsibility at a time in their lives when retirement interests would normally occupy their attention. This change in older adults’ lives will influence the role of gerontological nurses.

Primary child-rearing responsibilities can compromise the physical and mental health of custodial grandparents (Hayslip & Kaminski, 2005; Neely-Barnes, Graff, & Washington, 2010). Shouldering the innumerable tasks required to care for children can be both physically and emotionally draining. Because custodial grandparenting often emerges as a response to some kind of crisis in the nuclear family, it is not surprising that these grandparents might come to the attention of gerontological nurses for follow up to mental health needs. In addition, becoming a custodial grandparent often involves a difficult role transition, specifically since grandchildren typically experience stress in the transition. Also not surprisingly, grandparents raising grandchildren who demonstrate neurological, physical, emotional, or behavioral problems experience greater distress than do grandparents raising grandchildren without such problems or noncustodial grandparents (Emick & Hayslip, 1999).

Gerontological nurses should be cognizant of the possible influence of being a custodial grandparent on older adults’ health status. Custodial grandparents’ physical and psycho-
logical well-being should be routine-
ly screened and monitored, including
assessment of potential sources of
stress related to child rearing.

Grandparents need to attend to
their physical and mental health
needs to meet the challenges of rais-
ing children. Nursing interventions
aimed at enhancing the grandpar-
ent’s functioning are important.
Older clients need to be encouraged
to seek regular care for any exist-
ing health problems and to engage
in healthy lifestyle activities, such
as routine exercise and a healthy
diet. Recognizing that child-rearing
pressures exist, gerontological nurses
might need to encourage grandpar-
ents to seek out support—perhaps
through group meetings, child care
cooperatives, or other kinds of
respite care. Education, training, and
support services need to be readily
available to these grandparents.

Custodial grandparents may also
experience ambivalence toward the
adult child who is unsuccessful in
their parenting responsibilities. It is
recommended that family interven-
tion services be made accessible to
them.

Older adults who now have a
grandchild living within the home
may use an initial interview to tell
the story about how they have come
to raise their grandchildren and
some of the difficulties they might
be experiencing. Their story may
provide insight into their reasons
for assuming the parental role, their
strengths, and resources that might
be used to address their current situ-
ation. There might be a need to help
them understand that they possess
positive attributes that can be used
to help them respond to their pres-
ent circumstances. By engaging the
grandparent in conversation about
positive experiences and attributes,
he or she can begin to acknowledge
personal strengths, which affirms
self-competence.

Gerontological nurses encounter
custodial grandparents raising grand-
children in a variety of health care
settings, and they need to be pre-
pared to meet the unique challenges
confronting these older adults.

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