



The Grandparents and the COA

by Stephanie Abbott



“I always looked forward to being a grandmother. I pictured myself holding a new baby, reading the books my children

enjoyed to this child, having a new life to love. I never imagined I would be so scared for a grandchild because his father is an addict.”

Listen to this new member of Al-Anon, a support group for families of alcoholics. She is saying what so many grandparents face today. Some of them are in recovery from

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addiction themselves, or have had addiction in their families for generations; others are new to this painful experience. They all need support and information so they can be strong and proactive in helping their grandchildren.

The 2000 U.S. Census reports some 1.4 million children are living with their grandparents rather than parents. Alcohol or other drug problems is a common reason for such arrangements. Then there are many other grandparents providing back up care, doing what they can to provide stability to the lives of these children they love. Still others worry from a distance, prevented by their other responsibilities, health problems, geography, or by the resentment of their children to help very much.

What can Grandma and Grandpa do? After doing all the normal things that

don't work, like lecturing the addicted parent, blaming, and shaming – then alternating with playacting that all is well – many grandparents find much more effective ways to take action.

Get Empowered They feel empowered by educating themselves about the nature of addiction, because they can't help the children unless they understand the problem.

Get Support They also get strength from support groups because there they find others who truly understand and also have helpful ideas of how to cope effectively with particular sit-

uations, such as what to do if the child has to be in the car with a drunk driver, or how to respond when the child needs information about addiction.

Explore Resources Grandparents need to know what the child protection laws are in their state so they know what their options are if they feel the child needs to be out of the home. Seeking this knowledge is painful, but not as painful as feeling helpless. Living with alcoholic parents is abusive to children even without physical acting out. The grandparent may be the only one who can help. Many communities and schools are proactive for children of alcoholics, offering education, camps, and other support services. There is also the emergence of grandparents' support groups, with referrals to social services, and educational meetings in

churches, senior centers, and addiction treatment facilities.

Comfort the COA Parents are forever a part of a child, so the wise grandparent helps the child to understand that addiction is an illness, and—if there are any healthy parts of the parental relationship—tries to build on them. Children want to love their parents. They also need to know they did not cause the addiction and it is never their fault.

The grandparent can be a haven of stability, predictability and undemanding love, and they can help the child make sense of an unpredictable and irrational situation.

Stephanie Abbott, MA, specialized in the family aspects of addiction, created the family program at Brighton Hospital in Michigan, taught at Marymount College in Arlington VA and is the editor of NACoA NETWORK.

“Read to Me”

Here is a list of books for COAs and their grandparents to share.

What's “Drunk,” Mama? published by Al-Anon Family Group

Elephant in the Living Room by Jill M. Hastings and Marion Typo

I know the World's Worst Secret by Doris Sanford

I Wish Daddy Didn't Drink So Much by Judith Vigna

My Dad Loves Me, My Dad Has a Disease by Claudia Black

Also helpful: a coloring book published by Hazelden titled Winthrop and Munchie Talk about Alcohol.