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*Listening, learning,
and living together:
it's the science of life.*

Grandmothers as Parents¹

Suzanna Smith²

More than 2 million U.S. children are being raised by their grandparents. Thirty-eight percent of them are African American. These grandparents are in a unique situation, because for the most part, the children's biological mothers are experiencing problems that keep them from being successful parents. These grandmothers have tremendous responsibility, taking on the role of the main caregiver to prevent their grandchildren from being placed in foster care.

In a study reported in the journal *Family Relations*, a small sample of caregiving grandmothers reported that they used 7 main parenting strategies. They placed a high priority on communicating with their grandchildren. They also took a strong role in the educational process of their grandchildren (Gibson, 2005).

Grandchildren who have been abused, neglected, or abandoned may need extra time and support, and grandmothers provided encouragement and one-on-one attention. Grandparents also intentionally worked to boost children's lagging self-esteem. When grandmothers needed help with parenting, they turned to extended family; grandmothers also thought it was important to recruit male relatives to be positive role models for grandsons (Gibson, 2005).

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Finally, even if the biological parent was not physically located in the home, they were still present in the children's minds. Grandmothers found ways to respond to children's questions about their parents, explaining where they were and what happened to separate them from their children (Gibson, 2005).

Parenting is not easy under any circumstances, and grandmothers who become parents face many unique challenges, yet have many strengths that enabled them to be effective parents "the second time around."

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