one

PARENTING AGAIN, LIKE IT OR NOT

Alice first met Jacob at 3:00 o'clock one Saturday morning when a woman she had never seen before pounded on her front door. The woman said her name was Mary and that the father of the child standing next to her was Alice's son. Alice hadn't even known of the child's existence.

Jacob looked as if he might be around four years old; he was dirty, silent, and too thin. He had nothing with him but the worn-out clothes he had on. Alice could see her son sitting in the driver's seat of the old car, door open, motor running. He waved half-heartedly. *Lewis is out of jail again,* she thought. Mary asked Alice if she would watch Jacob for a while, and Alice said she supposed so. Mary pushed Jacob through the door, ran back to the car, and Mary and Lewis rattled off into the dark.

What Alice had just experienced is called a *drop-off.* She became one of the six and a half million grandparents in the United States who find themselves with full parental responsibility for their grandchildren. Instead of cuddling them and spoiling them and returning them to their parents, these grandparents must become parents again.

In the United States, seventy-one percent of these grandparents are under the age of sixty.[1] Some of them, though, are older and have retired. With the unexpected mouths to feed and clothing to buy, they must reenter the workforce. In this country, nineteen percent of second-time-around parents and their grandchildren live below the poverty level.

One of the common routes for grandparents to become parents again is when a social worker from an agency such as the Department of Social Services or the Cabinet for Health and Family Services—whatever it's called in a particular state—comes calling. He or she tells the grandparents that the state has removed the child or children from the parental home. The most common reason for this course of action is that the parents have been charged with various crimes connected to alcohol and drugs in addition to neglect, abuse, or abandonment. State agencies prefer to place children with a relative. If they have the name of the grandparents of the child, they will make contact with them and ask if they're willing to take the child and raise him or her, taking full parental responsibility. They are told that if no relative is willing to take the child, he or she will be placed in a foster home.

The second common route for grandparents becoming parents again is family intervention. Perhaps they discover their teenage daughter is pregnant, and they know she's not ready to be a parent. Maybe the dad is a teenager or an older guy who is long gone. Out of concern for the baby and love for their child, they take on the responsibility of bringing the baby into their home. The authorities are never involved, and at the time the grandparents think that's the best idea.

A third common way grandparents become parents is some version of what happened to Alice. Somebody drops the child or children on the doorstep without warning. A typical circumstance is that the person's son or daughter stops by the house with

the child and asks the grandparent to watch the baby for a few hours—but the child's biological parent simply never returns.[2]

The situation of grandparents raising grandchildren is approaching epidemic levels in the United States. Eight percent of children under the age of eighteen live with grandparents, a thirty-percent increase between 1990 and 2000. Between eighty and ninety percent of these cases occur because the children's parents are addicted to drugs and/or alcohol.[3]

All socioeconomic levels suffer from abuse and addiction. The impression that it's more prevalent in lower-income groups may grow from the inability of lower-income people to get needed services as quickly as persons with more social and financial resources. Persons with higher incomes are more likely to have support systems in place to help them before the situation becomes uncontrollable. They can hire lawyers or other professionals to rescue the grandchildren before emotional and perhaps physical damage is done by the chaotic lifestyle of drug-addicted parents.[4]

When Alice found herself with a four-year-old boy to raise, she considered her options. She was furious with Lewis for being up to his old tricks and his pattern of thinking only of himself. She knew that her inconvenience—much less Jacob's welfare—never entered Lewis's head. Her first inclination was to pick up the phone and get her son and his child out of her life once and for all. She was sixty-five years old, widowed, short on money, and short on energy. She could call the Department of Social Services (DSS), and a social worker would come and get Jacob and place him in foster care.

But that morning as she stood in the predawn chill, Alice's mental calendar rolled back. She could see Lewis standing in that same spot, looking very much like Jacob. The little boy's big brown eyes and shock of curly hair convinced Alice that he was indeed her son's child. *Am I really prepared to send away my own grandchild—my own flesh and blood—and let him grow up with strangers as a ward*

of the state? Will he be happy if I do that? Will he end up with people who will be good to him? Will anyone tell him about his birth family? For all his sins, Lewis was still her son, and she loved him. Even though it was against her better judgment, Alice knew she would keep Jacob. She would stretch her tiny pension as far as it would go. She would take him in, and she would love him.

There was another reason Alice didn't want to make that call: it could cause big trouble for Mary and Lewis. Knowing Lewis's history of substance abuse, Alice surmised that he and his girlfriend were both using drugs and alcohol and almost certainly living in their car. Her call would not only bring Jacob to the attention of the DSS but also Mary and Lewis. In fact, Alice wondered if the reason they had dropped Jacob off with her was that they had reason to believe they were just one step ahead of the authorities. If Jacob was not in their custody when Social Services caught up with them, they might escape charges of neglect, abandonment, and maybe abuse being added to the charges of illegal drug use. Did she want to be responsible for causing them even more trouble than they already had? Conflicted, she argued with herself and lost. She did not make the call.

Alice's situation is a little different from what's known as *kinship care*. This is the term often used to describe the circumstance in which the state removes children from their parents' home because of abuse or neglect or for other reasons. The state looks for relatives, usually grandparents, and after a determination that placement with a relative rather than a non-relative is in the best interest of the child, places the children with grandparents or other relatives. These relatives act as foster parents just as if they were unrelated foster parents, strangers to the child and his or her family. As is usual in such an arrangement, the children remain wards of the state, and the state has the final word in decisions regarding the children.[5]

Alice's life had clearly been turned upside down. A shudder of guilt ran through her. *How did it come to this? How could I mess up my son so badly that now I have to raise my own grandchild? Who will help me? Which way do I turn?*

She knew the first thing to do was to comfort the uprooted child. Alice wondered how it would feel to be four years old and awakened in the night, taken to an unfamiliar place, and left with a stranger.

Jacob stood in silence when Alice offered him a glass of milk. He finally drank it after she convinced him that it was for him and that it was okay to drink all of it. He let her give him a bath. He was still silent next day when they went to buy clothes for him to wear. Alice used the money she was saving for new shoes.

After caring for the child's most immediate needs, grandparents who find themselves in this situation should do several things.

Establish Paternity

It's a good idea to establish the identity of both parents rather than just making sure that the child belongs to your child. If you can find a birth certificate, it should list the mother. It may or may not list the father, and certainly it won't list grandparents. The supposed father's name on the birth certificate is not enough to establish paternity.[6]

Think Long-Term

Be realistic about the duration of this life adjustment. Grandparents often believe that their son or daughter just needs to work through this tough period before coming back for the child or children. "All I want is for my daughter to get her life straightened out and get her children back. I realize she has problems, but surely when she sees she's lost her children, she'll be motivated to turn her life around."

Grandparents tend to convince themselves that their son or daughter will get it together in a few months and return for the child. This line of thinking is almost always a mistake. It's unrealistic to think in terms of raising the child or children for months rather than years. If the parents can eventually take their children back, you can be pleasantly surprised. But don't count on it happening soon; it may never happen. Formalize some kind of custody arrangement immediately. We'll go into this in more detail in chapter two.

No matter how hard it is to face, assume that you're in this for a long time, maybe until the child becomes an adult. Make legally enforceable plans for someone to care for the child if you should become incapacitated. This is covered in an upcoming chapter.

Circuit Court Judge JoAnn Wise of the Fayette County, Kentucky, Family Court says, "Never ever when the [government] has become involved sit back and see what happens. If government agencies have become involved, in practical terms within a year those children may be given to somebody else. . . . Waiting back when [government] is involved is very, very dangerous. You should never sit back." Judge Wise makes the point that the people who tend to get their children back are the ones who have the support of their families.

"The [government] loves to know . . . they have somebody else . . . there to be their eyes and ears. And if they know they have the family support and . . . they know the grandparents are going to step in and do something when needed, that goes a long way to get kids back. . . . It's the parents who don't seem to have any family support who lose out."

Quit Worrying About Alienating the Child's Parents

The parents have bombed out, or you wouldn't be in this position. Of course, you still love your wayward child. Of course, you're embarrassed and maybe angry at the effect his or her actions are

having on the family. But your focus must be on what's good for the child and on preserving your own health and sanity. What should be your child's responsibility is now yours. Call the authorities yourself. Say something such as "I want to help my grandchild, but my resources are limited. I need to establish paternity, and I need to get custody and make long-term plans. What can I do? Can you help me?" Be sure to get the name of the person with whom you talk.

This will bring your child and the other parent to the attention of the authorities. It may mean that charges will be filed against the other parent. It may mean that you'll have to say to your child, "I'll do what I can to help you straighten out your life, and I'll emotionally support you. But I will not do it to the detriment of the child. So if the situation warrants it, I will step up and become your adversary to protect the child."

Contact a Lawyer Who Specializes in Family Law

At some point most grandparents who become parents again need professional legal help to negotiate the legal system. Only a member of the bar can go into court and file a motion, which is a formal request of the court to get something done. You will need a lawyer to help you gain custody of your grandchild. This is necessary so that you can enroll the child in school and make medical decisions and other important decisions on the child's behalf. Legally enforceable plans must be made to care for the child if your health fails or you die. Otherwise, there's a risk that your grandchild will be placed with strangers or returned to unfit parents. A lawyer can also help you find out what if any financial assistance is available to you from your state. And having legal representation is important if you have to fend off efforts from your own child to take your grandchild back into a bad living situation.

If you're not in a position to pay for a lawyer, there are several options. Call the local bar association and explain that you need

legal help and cannot afford to pay the full fee. The bar association will have a list of lawyers who do *pro bono*—in other words free—legal work. In addition, the bar association can provide you with names of lawyers who will work for reduced fees to serve those of limited income. Another option is to look in the white pages of your local telephone book under "Legal Aid" or on the Internet using "legal aid" as the search term. You'll find links to legal aid offices in your area. Legal aid lawyers will help you at little or no cost. The Yellow Pages may have an entry called "Legal Services" with helpful numbers.

If you have trouble locating a legal aid program in your area, look in the section of the telephone book for the state office listings. Some states have a toll-free help line for older adults, or you may find an entry for "Senior Citizens Center" or "Area Agency on Aging" or a similar name. Such an agency can direct you to help. If worse comes to worse, call a local lawyer. Whoever answers the phone should be able to give you information about local legal aid services.

Find a Support Group

You're not alone—support groups are everywhere. Find one and join it. If you have a church, share your situation with those friends. Find and talk with other grandparents who are raising their grandchildren. If you speak with someone at a government agency—a social worker, perhaps—he or she may know of local support groups. And once again, remember: you're not alone.

Remember: nothing takes God by surprise.

Lord, help me be equal to this task.
It seems too big right now.

Questions for Support Group Discussion

1. How did you come to be raising your children's children?

2. Have you established your grandchild's paternity?

3. Of the things mentioned in this chapter that should be done quickly, talk about which if any have been accomplished by the members of your group.

4. Do you worry about your relationship with your own child now that you're raising his or her child?

5. If some members of your group have been in contact with a lawyer concerning custody issues, ask them to talk about that.

6. How many in your group feel they're delaying making long-term decisions about raising their grandchildren?