



Kin and Grandfamilies: Tips for Working with Professionals

When raising children, there is always something new around the bend. This may be especially true for grandparents and kin raising other people's children. From technology to culture and education, raising kids has changed in recent years, and raising your own kids is different from caring for other people's children.

No matter the specifics of your situation, it is normal to have questions and need assistance when raising children. This fact sheet gives tips to help ensure you get the assistance you need from the various professionals you may interact with in your role as a grandparent or kin caregiver.

Professionals Who Might Be Able to Help

Here are some of the professionals with whom you may interact when raising a grandchild or other relative:

- **Lawyers or legal assistance:** A lawyer or legal expert can help with setting up a custody agreement or arranging adoption or other legal relationships.
- **Health care professionals, including doctors, nurses, therapists, counselors, emergency personnel, dentists, and others:** In addition to regular well-child check-ups and sick visits, children may need other health care depending on their age, health status, and other specifics. Many children who cannot live with their parents will benefit from talking to a counselor or other mental or behavioral health provider. Raising children presents many emotional challenges, and you may also want to consult a counselor or health care professional for yourself as well.
- **Teachers, tutors, school administrators:** As the child's caregiver, you will likely meet and talk with people involved in their education to enroll them or monitor and support their progress in school and extracurriculars.

- **Social workers, case workers, and others involved in child welfare agencies and organizations:** Social workers and case workers can help connect you with local resources and any services or benefits you or the child in your care may qualify for.

Need to find or access services for the child or children in your care? See the fact sheet: "Grandparents and Kin Caregivers: How to Access Services."

Tips for Working with Professionals

With all you are juggling, it can be difficult to keep track of who you have met with and what was said or recommended. Personnel at some agencies can change, and you may end up starting all over again with another person. It can also be frustrating if the representative does not understand your situation or have answers to your questions. Here are some tips for managing these situations.

- Take notes on what was discussed during meetings and keep these notes together. Include the date and time of the discussion as well as the full name, title, and phone number of the person or people you talked to, what they said, and what follow-up is needed by whom and by when.
- Prepare a short (3-5 sentence) description of your situation so that you can quickly explain what services you need. For example, "My daughter was a single parent who died, and I am caring for her three children, ages 5, 7, and 10. The 7-year-old has intellectual disabilities. I need help finding counseling."
- Prepare a list of questions or topics you want to cover in the meeting. Keep it handy so you can refer to it and make sure your concerns are addressed.
- If the person you are talking to cannot answer your questions, you feel that they are not understanding you, or you are not getting the help you need, ask to speak to a colleague or supervisor. Briefly summarize your concern and have a clear question or request for help.
- If possible, ask someone you trust to go along with you to any meeting. Prior to the meeting, discuss your plan and goals with your trusted person. Set up cues to use with each other, so that if your trusted person sees you getting upset, they can request a five-minute break. Your trusted person can also help take notes about the meeting.
- Practice what you are going to say ahead of time and how you will ask for help. You can do this with your trusted person prior to the meeting to get more comfortable.

- Advocate for the child(ren) in your care by speaking up and researching services that might help meet their needs. You know their strengths, challenges, and needs, and you will be their champion in getting needed care and services.
- If you are already working with a professional you trust, you can ask them if they have recommendations for other people who might help you in another aspect of your or the child's situation.

Common Scenarios

Every family is different, but these common situations may sound familiar and may give you some ideas of how to handle your interactions with the professionals in the child's life. The general tips above also apply to most of these situations.

My grandchild is complaining about having stomachaches. I talked to the doctor, and she said there's nothing wrong. My grandchild is still sick much of the time. I don't think the doctor is taking me seriously. What can I do?

- Keep track of your grandchild's symptoms. Include dates, times, severity, and what you did (e.g., giving medication).
- Ask the doctor to explain the reasons for what they are telling you.
- Be ready to explain your concern more assertively. That way, you can make sure that the doctor understands how much it is bothering you and your grandchild and how it is negatively impacting your lives.
- If you can, find another health care provider to get another opinion.

I'm having a hard time with money. I'm embarrassed to ask for help. What should I do?

- Everyone needs help sometimes. It is okay to say that you don't know what to do or that you feel embarrassed or nervous about asking for help.
- In some situations, you or the child you are caring for may qualify for services and supports from government agencies or community-based organizations. The fact sheet "How to Access Services" has information on how to find such services in your area.

I'm working with a professional who suggested that my niece's behavior problems are because of my parenting skills. I feel judged. What should I do?

- Remind the professional you are doing the best you can and let them know you appreciate their support, not their judgment.

- Be assertive with the professional when they minimize your experiences or blame you for the child's behavior. Let them know that is not helpful.
- Share the behavior that is most challenging for you, then ask them to recommend a minimum of three strategies to address that challenge. Pick one to try with the child.
- If the professional is not open to hearing and understanding your perspective, then it might be time to look for a new professional to help you.

Wrap-up

Raising other people's children presents joys and challenges. Working effectively with education, health care, and legal professionals, and various agencies and organizations dedicated to child welfare, can help ensure you and your family receive the support you need.

See companion fact sheet: "Grandparents and Kin Caregivers: How to Access Services"