

Our two cents: Salute area's grandparents raising kids

FAL 9:52 p.m. MST February 25, 2014

For those adults who have already raised their own children, imagine doing the same thing all over again in their 50s, 70s, even in their 90s.

It may seem unimaginable — how could a retired couple even muster the energy to follow a 3-year-old around the house? — but thousands of Montana grandparents are raising their grandchildren in place of the parents, a dizzyingly challenging exercise.

The reward, of course, is children get to stay with family members, and often, they prosper.

"These kids are turning out beautifully," said Jona McNamee, the Cascade County MSU Extension Service's family and consumer science agent in Great Falls. "They're good kids."

In Montana, the 2010 census found more than 6,600 grandparents were raising their grandchildren in the state, placing Montana in the top 10 among the states for grandparents raising grandchildren.

At first blush, it's heartwarming that grandparents step in when a parent dies from an illness; when a couple dies in a car crash or other accident; or a parent leaves the picture because of drug or alcohol abuse. The reasons a parent cannot continue to care for a child vary.

For the children and relatives, "It is a critical situation," McNamee said in an interview Tuesday. "Grandparents are very often the first ones called." And more grandparents are finding themselves in this position across the country.

"It's exhausting," McNamee said of grandparents raising their kids' children. "They deal with a lot of guilt and they feel like they're all alone."

The Extension Service assists a Grandparents Raising Grandchildren support group in Great Falls that usually meets the last Monday of the month from September through March.

The meeting in March features instruction from a Great Falls school specialist on dealing with kids and all the social media platforms out there.

Grandparents have a tough enough job without hearing some of the rude remarks they receive from unthinking friends and acquaintances, McNamee added. One of the worst comments, she said, is: "Well, if you had raised your children right, you wouldn't be raising your grandchildren." That hurts.

It helps if people are "able to understand their situation and not judge them," McNamee said. "If you know somebody who's raising a grandchild, just as you can help."

The support group features some spirited conversations and some ah-ha moments.

As one woman raising a teen told the group, "I'm so tired of my granddaughter rolling her eyes at me."

Other people at the meeting assured her she was not alone.

We salute all the grandparents out there, raising their grandchildren to little fanfare. We also thank the government workers, volunteers, sponsors and donors helping grandparents succeed in their effort to raise healthy, happy grandchildren who will contribute to society.

— Tribune editorial board

For more information about Grandparents Raising Grandchildren, call the Cascade County Extension Office, 454-6980, or visit the office at 3300 3rd S N.E. in Great Falls.

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