

FACT SHEET — *This fact sheet is for grandparents.*

Issues for grandparents

If you suspect your daughter's husband or partner is an abuser

Your suspicions may not be based on anything definite, perhaps just a few odd things your grandchildren have said, or perhaps something you've noticed that's unusual. You may feel that it's not your place to do anything, that it's your daughter's responsibility to protect her children. You might be angry at her for being ambivalent about protecting her children. You might be angry because she is still attached to the person you suspect. You might think that perhaps she doesn't choose her men very well. These are all normal feelings to have.

As a grandparent, there are torn loyalties. On the one hand, you love your daughter and don't want to upset her. On the other hand, you love your grandchildren and do not want to stand by if they are being hurt. Overall, you just want everyone to be safe. You're not talking about wanting custody or removing them from the family home, you just want the situation to be better. Because of this, you may not want to report your suspicions to the authorities. If you're in this position, ring CASA and ask to speak to one of our counsellors to discuss your concerns.

If you suspect your son is the abuser

As the parent of the suspected abuser, your loyalties are tested even more. You're faced with the choice of watching your grandchildren being hurt or reporting your son to the authorities. It's a very difficult situation. If your son is reported and charged, your daughter-in-law may be very angry with you. She may not allow you to see her children because the abuser was your son. These are children you used to spend time with and now you're denied access completely. Your daughter-in-law might say: "How did you bring your son up? Where did he learn this behaviour? I don't want my children to have anything to do with your family."

Some grandparents try to cope with the guilt through denial and believe that their son was not responsible for his actions – that he was led astray by his wife or someone else. Others believe that their son is innocent. It's very hard to accept that your son has done this to your grandchildren.

Custody and access

Grandparents do have rights. The family law act says that a child has a right to see anybody who is a significant person in their life. Grandparents have a right under the family law act to apply for access to a child who sees them as very much a part of their life. However, going to court can be a difficult and expensive process and is usually the last resort. There are circumstances when the Department of Health and Human Services may place children with grandparents. This puts grandparents in the middle of the family crisis and raises a whole range of issues. Some of these are discussed below.

Guilt

If you're now caring for your grandchildren, your old may vanish. You might have been involved in golf or bingo or with a busy social life. Now you have children to care for it's a very different life. If you're on your own and living on a pension, it can be financially very stressful. There are the pressures of school, getting them to tidy their rooms, and all the washing. Even thinking like this can make grandparents feel guilty. But they have every right to — it's a thankless task. Small children have no concept of how hard it is for their grandparents to look after them. You may also begin to doubt your own parenting skills and feel guilty for all sorts of reasons. These are all normal feelings.

Anger

You may feel angry with the authorities for automatically assuming that you'll take care of the children, or for even putting you in the position where you have to make that decision. You may be angry with your daughter or son because you're now supporting their children. You could also be getting pressure from the rest of the family for doing it. The family might feel that your son or daughter should never see their own children again. And you're the one stuck in the middle.

Age hurdles

If you're at an advanced age you may find it difficult to physically cope. It's hard picking up after children all day and you may find yourself constantly exhausted. Often there are child management problems too. Because you were born in a different era, and were a parent in a different era, what you think is appropriate when you brought up your children may no longer be considered acceptable. For instance, if you parented in an era where a smack on the bottom was fine, that's no longer ok. You may begin to feel you're out of your depth.

When the grandfather is the abuser

If your husband or partner is the abuser, it will be devastating for you. You'll be forced to re-evaluate your relationship at a time in your life when you just want things to be peaceful. You'll be feeling like you're being forced to choose or don't know which way to turn.

If the grandfather is either not reported or is left on parole in the home

If the abuser is to stay in your home, you'll be faced with very difficult decisions. Should you get a divorce or separate? At 70 years or so, this is very hard. The alternative may be not seeing your grandchildren as they are no longer allowed to come to the house if the grandfather is there. You'll be expected to take sides, and not everyone will be happy.

If you choose to stay with your husband or partner, there will be a lot of spoken or unspoken animosity in the family about him. Your daughter or daughter-in-law will be angry and may deny you any access to the children in retaliation. Often other members of the family won't take their children to see you either, so that no grandchildren visit you at all. If you want to see them, it maybe you who has to do all the visiting. This can be very difficult if you're immobile, have transport difficulties, are emotionally exhausted or cannot afford to visit.

If the grandfather is charged and jailed.

If your husband or partner is jailed, you will have to learn to live by yourself. After all this time is very difficult to cope with. This is not a time when it's easy to move somewhere else either. You may have a routine with nearby shops and rely on your local community in other ways. You also may have relied on your husband or partner to maintain the household or financial affairs, a task that you now must do yourself which is both daunting and frightening. You may feel unsafe living alone and have difficulty sleeping. Also, you may feel a lot of embarrassment that everyone in your community knows about your husband or partner's crime.

Grandparent issues and counselling

CASA will listen, offer information and explore choices with you. All our services are free and you can be anonymous if you wish. Our counsellors are trained to see issues from many perspectives. Sometimes grandparents feel uncomfortable at first if their counsellor is quite different to them in age, but it's worth persisting. Sometime the most rewarding counsellor / client relationships can be formed between people of vastly differing ages.