Tips for grandparents helping to raise children

As retirement age approaches, many older adults envision themselves downsizing and moving to a quaint community to enjoy their golden years in as relaxing a fashion as possible. However, for a growing number of seniors, their retirement years are being spent helping to raise grandchildren.

United States Census data from 2010 indicates 4.9 million American children are being raised solely by their grandparents. CanGrads, a National Kinship Support organization, says approximately 62,500 children are being raised by grandparents and other family in Canada. Many grandparents provide part-time care when their older children have to move back home with their families, as roughly 13 million children are now living in homes with their grandparents.

Although being raised by grandparents may not be the ideal situation for all parties involved, such situations are a necessity for many families. Seniors who are once again thrown into the caregiver arena may need a crash course in childcare or a few pointers on parenting in the modern age.

• Get the right equipment. Children certainly require a lot of gear, more than grandparents likely used when raising their own children. Certain safety requirements are in place to safeguard young children, and that often means investing in new cribs, car seats, high chairs, and other items. Grandparents should resist the temptation to use old items they may have kept in storage, as such items may no longer be safe and could put grandchildren at risk for injury.

• Gather important documents. Grandparents should keep pertinent documents in one easily accessible place in their homes should an emergency arise. These include birth certificates, health immunization records, death certificates (if the child's parents are deceased), dental records, school papers, citizenship papers, and proof of income and assets.

• Speak with an attorney. Lawyers can help grandparents wade through legal arrangements, such as filing for custody, guardianship or adoption. Options vary depending on where petitioners live, but lawyers can provide peace of mind to grandparents concerned about their grandkids' futures.

• Investigate financial assistance. Seniors may not earn the income they once did and may be on assistance programs or living off of retirement savings. Grandparents who find themselves caring for a child may be eligible for financial assistance. The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families is a joint federal and state program that can provide need-based financial assistance. The AARP or the organization GrandFamilies may be able to put grandparents in touch with financial advisors in their areas.

• Contact schools and daycare centers. School-aged children will need to be enrolled in school. Grandparents should contact the department of education where they live to learn about local school systems, especially when grandkids are moving in with their grandparents. Some grandparents can qualify for free or low-cost daycare, and such programs can be discussed with local Social Services offices. Enrollment in school or daycare can provide grandparents with much-needed free time during the day.

• Find emotional support. Taking care of grandchildren is a full-time job. At times, grandparents may feel stressed or out of sorts. Having a strong support system available

can help grandparents work through the peaks and valleys of this new and unexpected stage in life. Church or community center-based counseling services may be available. Grandparents also can check with their healthcare providers to determine if counseling or therapy sessions are covered under their plans.

Caring for grandchildren is a life-changing event. Although it can be fulfilling, it also requires a lot of energy and commitment. But grandparents needn't go it alone, as there are numerous resources available to seniors who suddenly find themselves caring for their grandchildren.

How to protect your vision over the longhaul

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, eye diseases related to aging are the primary cause of vision impairment in the United States. Many people consider vision loss a natural side effect of aging, but there are ways men and women can protect their vision and reduce their risk of vision loss as they age.

• Quit smoking. According to the National Eye Institute, smoking doubles a person's risk for age-related macular degeneration, or AMD. AMD is a leading cause of vision loss in men and women over the age of 50. It causes damage to the macula, which is the part of the eye needed for sharp, central vision. If the macula is damaged, vision may be blurry, distorted or dark.

• Protect eyes from ultraviolet light. The American Optometric Association notes that UV-A and UV-B radiation can have adverse effects on a person's vision. A short-term effect of excessive exposure to UV radiation is photokeratitis, a painful condition that can lead to red eyes, extreme sensitivity to light and excessive tearing. Long-term effects of such exposure include a higher risk of developing cataracts and damage to the retina, which is the part of the eye used for seeing. When spending time outdoors, always wear sunglasses that provide protection against UV-A and UV-B rays.

• Maintain a healthy blood pressure. High blood pressure, often referred to as HBP or hypertension, can contribute to vision loss as a person ages. The American Heart Association notes that HBP can strain blood vessels in the eyes, causing them to narrow or bleed. HBP also can cause the optic nerve to swell, compromising a person's vision as a result. Eye damage that results from HBP is cumulative, which means the longer it goes untreated, the more likely the damage to the eye will be permanent. Men and women can maintain a healthy blood pressure by eating right, exercising regularly and sustaining a healthy weight.

• Take breaks from work. Computer vision syndrome, or CVS, is a legitimate condition that can develop when a person spends ample time staring at a computer screen. Adults and kids alike are susceptible to CVS, which can cause symptoms such as blurred vision, double vision, eye irritation, and headaches. One way to reduce risk of developing CVS is to take frequent breaks from staring at the screen. A handful of 20-second breaks over the course of an hour can help prevent CVS. In addition, change lighting in the room where you work so you can reduce glare on the computer screen.