

What about the children? (Grandparent and relatives roles)

Dear Denise:

I am a grandma who is very concerned about her grandchildren. My daughter and her husband are both heroin addicts. I know they are not very capable of taking care of their children. I spend as much time as I can with them but due to financial and physical constraints I cannot take them full time. I am afraid for them to go into foster care. I hear it is very difficult to get your kids back and I am afraid I will never see them again. But, I am also afraid for them being with their parents. How can we help these kids?

Regards,
Dana

Dear Dana:

As I'm sure you know, you are not the only grandma who needs help. As this opioid problem has grown so has the issue of how to keep the kids safe. As you mentioned, taking the kids away from the family leads to all kinds of problems yet keeping them safe in that environment is of the utmost priority.

You don't mention the age group of your grandchildren but lets talk a little bit here about what can be happening in these homes so those who are reading this and have no experience with this can get an overview and see just how serious this is.

Over the years I have worked helping families I have come across a lot whose children have been taken away. Usually this solves the "safety" issue temporarily but not the emotional issues. The kids are taken away from the only family they know which most of them consider their normal. They miss their families and are scared that they will never see them again. It is less of a problem with the very young children. The children around 8-14 are especially impacted. Many of them take on trying to keep their younger siblings safe as well as trying to keep their parents alive. It is a big burden for them. I have been with professionals locally who have talked about middle and high school kids who leave school early to get home before their younger siblings or skip altogether thinking that if they are home with their parents they might be able to keep them from dying. Some have been instructed not to talk about the family situation to anyone, especially at school, and have been instructed about the use of Narcan. A lot of responsibility for children. There is also the fears of violence and strangers coming and going. What will their parents be like when they get up in the morning or come home from school? Will they be angry and violent or loving and kind? Are these strangers going to harm them? Many homes with small children turn into almost unlivable situations for children. Those who use and abuse drugs sometimes can't focus on anything but their next fix and there is no food around or attention to the kids who need to be cleaned, clothed, fed.

There are resources for children as well as grandparents that are beginning to be available nation wide. AARP has some programs that address this issue. Most local mental health facilities have resources. There are grandparent raising grandchildren support groups online (specifically for those related to addiction in the family) who might share resources.

There was an article in the New York Times this week about an elementary school in Ohio where they are attacking this problem head on because there are so many kids there with mental health issues brought on by addiction in the family. They have special classes, resources for the kids, therapists who give them tools to deal with different scenarios that might

occur. Just keeping the secret creates so many problems for these young kids.

Dana, these children are victims of a terrible public health issue that is in every city and town in this nation. Surry County is no different. We have basically lost a generation to this epidemic and if we don't take care of the kids there will be another generation lost to this. I am with you on the impact this is having on children and this should be a major priority. At the county level we are working on this and trying to be able to offer solutions. Please check out some of the resources I mentioned and watch the county website for progress. The children are our future.

Sincerely,
Denise Krochta