

Grit 'n' Grace — THE PODCAST

Episode #265: How to Succeed at Raising Your Children's Children

Amy

When grandparents take on the job of parenting grandchildren, a mix of blessing and challenge ensues.

Cheri

From the rich resource of personal experience, Rick Johnson, author of ***When Grandparents Become Parents***, shares a dose of hope for all involved in this tricky parenting model.

Amy

If you're a grandparent that's parenting your grandchild — or love someone who is! — today you're in for words of encouragement that you can absorb and share.

Cheri

Well, this is Cheri Gregory ...

Amy

... and I'm Amy Carroll

Cheri

and you're listening to Grit 'n' Grace: THE PODCAST that equips you to love who you're NOT, love who you ARE, and live your ONE life well.

Amy

Today we're talking with Rick Johnson, author of ***When Grandparents Become Parents: How to Succeed at Raising Your Children's Children***. Rick is a bestselling author of twelve books that have been translated into fifteen languages. He has appeared on 300 radio programs and television shows around the United States and Canada, is the former co-host of a live weekly radio show and is a frequent guest host of other local programs. He and his wife, Suzanne, have two adult children and one grandchild, whom they are currently raising.

Cheri

There's a quiet epidemic in our culture:

Amy

The fastest-growing type of family unit is grandparents charged with the task of raising their children's children.

Cheri

Though there are myriad reasons for this—the death of one's adult child, parental drug addiction, abusive living situations, or incarceration, to name a few—the effects tend to be the same:

Amy

Senior citizens who expected to spend their golden years relaxing or traveling are now seeing their dreams dashed.

Cheri

Those on limited incomes are feeling the strain and are frightened about their futures.

Amy

And the mental, spiritual, and physical exhaustion of parenting and disciplining children many decades their junior, exacerbated by a technology gap, is overwhelmingly real.

Cheri

And yet, through their sacrificial service, these seniors are acting as kinsman-redeemers for their grandchildren ...

Amy

... keeping them out of the foster care system and giving them the best shot possible for a successful life.

Cheri

In *When Grandparents Become Parents*, experienced author Rick Johnson details both the challenges and solutions these heroic seniors face ...

Amy ... offering strategies and resources (including real advice from other grandparents) to deal with major areas of stress ...

Cheri

... incorporating humor, common sense, and practical advice along the way.

Amy Carroll

Rick, welcome to Grit 'n' Grace!

Rick Johnson

Thank you. I'm really glad to be here. Thanks.

Amy Carroll

Well, we are happy to have you here. You have such an interesting story. And we know that every book has a backstory. So can you share with us what inspired your new book, *When Grandparents Become Parents: How to Succeed at Raising Your Children's Children?*

Rick Johnson

Well, interestingly, about, I don't know, 10-12 years ago, my previous publisher had approached me and said, "Hey, what do you think about doing a book on grandparents raising grandchildren?" And I'm like, "Well, first of all, I'm not a grandparent. Second of all, I'll never raise my grandchildren, right?" The famous saying, never say never, right?

Amy Carroll

Yes.

Rick Johnson

So about six years ago, our son passed away. And they had a little girl. And the wife, unfortunately, was diagnosed with a very dangerous mental illness. This disease, the mental illness that she has, manifests itself by introducing things into the baby, causing it to be sick and be hospitalized. And then apparently the thrill of this mental illness is

one, fooling the medical establishment; and two, she gets these kudos for being this great mom that takes care of the sick baby.

So anyway, this woman had isolated us from the family and the baby, we'd only seen this baby like once or twice. And one day, she posted on Facebook that the baby was going to have to go to John Hopkins and get some surgery or something done because she was allergic to every food group there was. And my wife was like, I know that hospital, I know that view out that window right there. I'm gonna go down there and talk to the social worker. Which, you know, speaks to the FBI-type investigation skills of mothers, right?

So anyway, she went down late at night and talked to the social worker, and she's like, "Yeah, well, I don't know what I can do if anything." But to her credit, she called all the different hospitals around the city, and got this huge folder of medical ... The next day, we got a call from them, saying, you know, you need to come into the hospital, trade off spending the weekend while we introduce all these food groups to her. And of course, she was allergic to nothing.

And so we entered this long process of adopting her through the state. You know, three and a half years of parental visitations, court day. I mean, it was just a nightmare ... as bad as it was for us, I think we probably were treated as well, or better than most people because of my background of writing all these parenting books and my wife's background of having worked for special needs kids for 20 years in the public schools.

Finally, we were actually able to get the adoption through and she's great now. I mean, she's almost 10 years old, she's a straight A student, and wonderful, healthy.

Amy Carroll

Rick, I just want to, you know, acknowledge just a few things in there. First of all, I'm so sorry for the loss of your son. And there was a lot of pain embedded in that little synopsis that you gave us on your end, but it also gives us a glimpse into the pain that probably other grandparents have suffered through. So thank you for giving us you know, a nutshell. But I just want to pause to acknowledge that.

Rick Johnson

Thank you for that. I would agree with your point. Whether your child dies or is on drugs or is in prison or just leaves, you know, there's a grief process there for every parent,

grandparent — so I think you're right. I mean, I don't think your child has to die for you to be grieving. I think that's the process of probably all grandparents that have to raise their grandkids.

Cheri, I'm sorry to interrupt you.

Cheri Gregory

No, I was just, you know, just listening to you. I have this sense of cascading events. First of all, there's the loss of your son, which alone would have been enough to try to handle, then there's the mental illness and concern for your granddaughter, then there's the whole process of being able to be the ones who care for her. And I just haven't thought of this. And I'm guessing that quite a few of our listeners, if they're not involved with a family who's going through these multiple — I don't think it's a stretch to call them — traumas. You know, they're like, “Oh, how nice your grandchild has come to live with you. Isn't that every grandparents dream?”

Rick Johnson

Right, or "You're so great for doing this!" They have no clue.

Cheri Gregory

So thank you for sharing all that can be a part of this. Because for those of us for whom this isn't our story, the awareness can be so important, that this isn't the storybook that it might look like on the outside, when the cute grandkids, all dressed up, are coming to church with grandma and grandpa.

Rick Johnson

And I would say, you know, I mean, for me personally, losing my son, my only son, was — if I hadn't have had the responsibility of raising my granddaughter, I don't think I would have lived through it. So you know, you can look at it as a horrible thing or you can look at it as a blessing. And she's truly been a blessing in our lives. Some challenges we'll talk about. Yeah, she's a blessing. There's no question about it.

Cheri Gregory

Yeah, well, you know, like so many things in life, it's not all one or the other. It's complicated. You know, Amy and I are constantly making fun of memes on social media that take very complicated things and oversimplify them, we're like, "No, our lives have not been like that."

So let's talk about grand families. That's a term that's new to me. So help us understand, what is a grand family? And why is this topic important for us today?

Rick Johnson

Sure. Well, as I understand it, grandfamilies are grandparents raising their grandchildren. I think it possibly could include three generations of families living together like a child, a single parent, and a grandparent. So yeah, I think that's what the establishment or the state calls families that have a grandparent raising their child.

Amy Carroll

There are lots of different circumstances and you pointed to some in your story, but what are some of the other circumstances that lead to grandparents taking care of their grandchildren? And I guess, combined with that is what are the most common reasons parents are unable to take care of their children?

Rick Johnson

Well, the phenomenon, I guess, of this huge growth of grandparents raising grandchildren, I think primarily is broken down into what they call the four Ds, which are divorce, desertion, drugs and death. And I'm pretty sure drugs are probably the highest of that list. But you know, I mean, drug addictions, especially opioids, abuse or neglect, higher rates of divorce, mental illness, economic fast factors, physical health, military service, death, incarceration, teen and adult wedlock pregnancy. And I think sometimes just plain selfishness are some of the reasons why adults are leaving their parenting to their parents to raise their children.

Cheri Gregory

So as I'm listening to you, you know, this, this podcast used to be very much for those of us who are recovering from perfectionism and people-pleasing. And so many of our listeners, like Amy and I grew up with an ideal in our mind, and no matter how hard I

tried to shake it – and you know, the last few years have even brought this out in me – my ideal that I grew up with was boy meets girl, in a Christian college, they get married, they move away from both sets of family, at least far enough away that there won't be a lot of meddling or too much attachment. And they start their own family and they are independent.

And then they see each other on holidays, and they send photos, and they all live happily ever after. And I'll have to admit, in my mind, anything that's deviated from that – so even like during the pandemic, having our adult children come back and live at home with us, like, it was the right thing. It was the best thing for everybody involved, especially from an economic standpoint, but I fought it in my heart, like this is not the way things are supposed to be.

So you know, these circumstances that you just described, many of them are non-ideal. And so I'm just curious, I mean, does that play a part in it? Is there any embarrassment or shame or shunning or keeping quiet about the circumstances? I don't – I mean, for you personally, but also for those that you've worked with, I'm just curious what your experience is.

Rick Johnson

Well, first of all, let me just say, off the cuff, that, you know, this ideal image that you and I probably have, and especially, it's perfect, perfectionism that – I don't know about you, but I come from a very abusive background. So I had this, you know, perfectionism that I had to achieve. That's probably the minority of the way the rest of the world is right now, I would say.

Having said that, you know, one of the challenges, I think, for me and for many, many grandparents that are raising their children, is the fact that we literally lost almost all of our friends. When our son passed away. Very few stuck around. Whether they were uncomfortable, whether they didn't know what to say, whatever it was, even my peers in ministry abandoned me. I mean, it's literally how I felt.

And in fact, I felt like God abandoned me as well. I had 20 years of ministry, I always had a very close relationship with God. I could feel Him, the Holy Spirit speaking to me. And through this whole grieving process, God was silent. Or at least, I couldn't hear Him. So you know, I think to some degree, whatever the factors are, like you described, or whatever, grandparents do get shunned. You know, part of the problem is friends. We have people that we meet, but they have little kids, and they're young, they don't

want to hang out with old people, people our age don't want to be with somebody who's saddled with a child, because we can't go travel around the country like we had planned to do in our golden years. That, I think, is probably something that most grandparents struggle with, along with a plethora of other things.

Cheri Gregory

Sure, sure. So in addition to everything else we've been discussing, there's an isolation at a time when most people would assume, like you said, you're kind of enjoying the fruits of your of your golden years.

Rick Johnson

Exactly.

Cheri Gregory

Wow.

Rick Johnson

So interestingly, statistically, when a child dies, about 85% of marriages break up. And so we've been lucky that we survived, you know, our marriage through this whole – then you add the stress of raising a child, all the other stresses. So yeah, it's been an interesting process.

Cheri Gregory

So let's talk a little bit about how we value raising kids as a whole in our society. I mean, what you've had the perspective of raising your own child, and now raising your grandchild with all of these other dynamics, talk to us about how we value raising kids?

Rick Johnson

Well, the question is do we value raising kids? Almost all grandparents or raising parents get no support from the state. None whatsoever. And then you have maybe grandparents who are undocumented, that are raising grandkids, they can't go to the state and ask for help, you know, hopefully, they have an extended family that can come alongside them, and help them out financially.

And of course, the biggest thing, from my perspective is childcare so you get a break every now and then. I mean, you know, I'm not 40 years old anymore. So, this 24/7 of having a child constantly, you know, jumping on my back and yelling in my ears like, uh.

I went down a rabbit trail and don't remember what your question was.

Cheri Gregory

We're talking in general here about how we value raising kids. It seems very compartmentalized. Keep going.

Rick Johnson

Yeah, the state doesn't do anything. I think it's a numbers game to them. They process, they warehouse these foster kids and, you know, like I wrote in my book, grandparents raising grandchildren is the fastest growing type of family unit in the U.S. About 13 million kids are being raised in a home of the grandparent by 2.7 million grandparents, so each grandparents raising multiple grandchildren – which, boy, that would be tough – I think that's doubled in the past 40 years. And that was according to the 2010 census, I don't think we did a 2020 census, but if we had, I'm sure those numbers would be a lot higher now than they were in 2010.

So, you know, for every kid in foster care, about 25 are being raised, others are being raised by their grandparents. So, you know, we need a champion to be able to access services. And we've moved to Texas, and we love living in Texas, but literally no health care providers here take state insurance, you know, so we're trying to find counseling services, we're trying to find medical, dental. And we live way out in the country. So you know, it's not like there's a lot of services to begin with. But even when you get down around Fort Worth, there doesn't seem to be a lot of providers that accept that kind of insurance. So that's a good challenge.

Cheri Gregory

Again, my stereotype is, by the time somebody is a grandparent, they know everything, they have all the resources, their life is all lined up. And what you're making me realize is that the finances may well be diverted to, you know, to the needs of the child and the resources and the services may or may not be available.

Rick Johnson

Yeah, you think we'd have our act together by now, wouldn't you?

Cheri Gregory

Well, I didn't mean it as a slam! It's the sense of—

Amy Carroll

You've gotten a curveball.

Cheri Gregory

Yeah, you know, you should have arrived at this stage and be able to relax a little. And like Amy said, it's a curveball. Go ahead, Amy.

Amy Carroll

Yeah, no, well, because I'm listening, and I'm thinking about what God is doing in my life right now, which is to build empathy for people. But part of being empathetic, should not just be like, saying, "Oh, I feel you, I feel that painful story you just told," but part of being empathetic is to leap into action to do something to help.

So Rick, help us to know how, if we have grandparents that are raising grandchildren, in our church and our neighborhood, what are some things that we can do that would be truly helpful?

Rick Johnson

Well, and you know, I think on many social issues, the church could be a huge factor in being able to help. I mean, you know, we've known other grandparents that were raising grandchildren, that we've connected with churches that were doing food banks and stuff like that, that's a huge help. I mean, it really is.

Amy Carroll

Okay, so that's a great practical to advocate for in your church.

Rick Johnson

And not only that, but to get that word out. I think grandparents that are raising grandchildren tend to be a bit isolated, might not go to church. For instance, we knew our neighbor — she was a great grandmother raising a five-year-old and a seven-year-old. And she's just got a pension from nursing her whole life. It's not that much. And the kids got a little bit of death benefits from Social Security. But, you know, she was basically in poverty. And so we connected her with several food banks, got her hooked up with the church that she started going to. And I think it helped her life.

But to churches — again, the biggest thing, I think, is having a break. I mean, even if me and my wife want to go out to dinner right now, because we don't have extended family, it's minimum \$10 an hour for a babysitter. So if we go out for four hours, that's 40 bucks there plus dinner, plus whatever it is we want to do, and then we have to rush back home and hope they didn't burn the kitchen down. So, you know, we can't afford that. I mean, we're on a budget, you know, it's not like we have a ton of money. We're much luckier than most people and that we're financially solvent, but we don't have a lot of money.

So financially — getting a break, is a big one; financially is a huge one. I think — I don't remember this statistic I quoted in my book, but a huge percentage of grandparents raising grandchildren are below the poverty level. Most of them are living on Social Security, which is nothing, hardly.

So those are huge things. Friends, again, are another, just somebody to come alongside you, they don't even have to do — I mean, the best thing a friend ever did for me, one of the friends that stayed friends with me after my son had passed away, was the guy that just came over, never said anything, took me to gun shows to muscle car shows, you know, saw guy movies, I mean, you know, just stuff hanging out to take my mind off and stuff. And sometimes it's as simple as that. It's just being there. It's not having any great wise advice or anything like that.

Amy Carroll

That's fantastic. And I'm just thinking too, and I mean, in addition to the things that you've listed, respite care, gift cards is something easy to grocery stores, or now to gas stations for heaven's sakes, you know, and so we could do those kinds of things. But I'm thinking somebody who's listening, maybe a lawyer, or someone involved in state government, or someone who knows someone who is involved in state government that can speak it sounds like really, our policy has to change to support grandparents who are parenting.

Cheri Gregory

So Rick, how do children respond to being raised by grandparents? I've been sitting here thinking about the generation gap, like, I was 23 when I had my daughter, and that generation gap feels like the Grand Canyon. And so I'm just even trying to imagine what it's like ... How do kids respond, and what kind of psychological impact does grand families have on the children involved?

Rick Johnson

That's a great question. There is a generation gap a lot of times. I think the biggest challenge is that a lot of kids, grandchildren, that come into these situations have already – are coming in with baggage. Whether it's, you know, ADHD, whether it's attachment disorder, whether having been a drug, or alcohol, fetal syndrome baby or whatever it may be, a lot of them have issues.

That being said, statistically, kids being raised by grandparents do pretty much just about as well as kids being raised by their biological parents. On the whole I think grandkids being raised by grandparents do very well. It's skewed a bit by older kids that come in with issues probably. But nevertheless, I think, pretty good.

Amy Carroll

Rick, what closing words do you have for our friends who are listening and maybe parenting a grandchild or wanting to support someone who is?

Rick Johnson

Well, I would just tell anybody, you know, I wrote in my book that grandparents who are raising grandchildren are virtually heroes, I think. And I certainly don't think of myself as a hero. But the truth of the fact is that your grandchildren might be in very dire circumstances, abused or even dead, if you hadn't intervened and given up virtually everything to raise them and make sure that they were safe.

So I would just tell them to kind of hold on to that. I talk about being a kinsman redeemer in my book. And I think that's what grandparents really are. They're ones that have taken somebody who had nothing and taking care of them so and virtually saving their lives, or you gave them their lives.

So, you know, it's kind of trite to say, "Hang in there, you're doing great." But I think I think that's really, you know, the issue. And people that want to help again, gosh, you know, offer to babysit, give them some time, what my wife would do – what my wife and I would do for a weekend away, much less a week in the Bahamas or something, you know. So you know, just come alongside people I think is really what we need, we need human contact.

Cheri Gregory

Sounds good. And it also sounds like that dog wants to be reconnected with you.

Rick Johnson

Here's a perfect example of no good deed goes unpunished. My wife – In Texas, people abandon dogs all the time, right? So I don't know where you guys are from. But, she's driving along and she sees this dachshund over by the dumpster on the road, and she pulls over and she goes, "Well, whose puppy are you?" And the dog just darted straight into her arms, right? She's like, "Okay, I guess you're my puppy. My dog, right?" So of course, she drags another dog home. I'm like, we got enough dogs already. You know, she's off lead and everywhere. We had to take care of her, get her all fixed up, etc. So pretty soon she's getting pretty fat, and we're thinking well, are we feeding her too much or what?

Amy Carroll

Oh, no.

Rick Johnson

She's pregnant. Oh, well, now we know why they abandoned her. So we have two three day old puppies. They're in here. They wanted their mommy. That's pretty much all they do.

Cheri Gregory

There's something so poetic that you're actually – not only are you grandparenting your granddaughter but you are now a grandparent to puppies.

Rick Johnson

Right? I put a mandate down. We're not keeping these puppies.

Amy Carroll

Good luck with that, Rick!

Cheri Gregory

You have to know, Amy is a huge dachshund fan. Her face lit up.

Amy Carroll

I wish I lived closer. I'd give you a week in the Bahamas and take your dachshund.

Cheri Gregory

Well, Rick, thank you so much. This has been such a great combination of you know, hearing your heart and your own personal experience and some really practical information and we've not shared anything like this at all in seven years of our podcast, so this is – I know it's not new information for you and others like you. but it is definitely new for a lot of our listeners. So thank you so much for ministering to us and our listeners but also in informing us and educating us.

Rick Johnson

I appreciate the opportunity. I'm hoping that this book allows me to go out and kind of spread the word a little bit about some of the things that people might not be aware of. That would be willing to help, you know, but just don't know what to do.

Cheri

Friends, we so appreciate you tuning in each and every week.

Amy

And we're especially grateful to **Rick Johnson** and his publisher **Salem Books** for making this week's episode of Grit 'n' Grace possible!

Cheri

Check out this episode's webpage at [Grit N Grace The Podcast . com / episode 265](http://GritNGraceThePodcast.com/episode/265) .
There you'll find this week's *transcript* and a link to Rick's book, ***When Grandparents Become Parents***

Amy

Be sure to join us next week when we'll be processing what we learned from Rick Johnson, author of ***When Grandparents Become Parents***.

Cheri

For today, grow your grit ...

Amy

... embrace God's grace ...

Cheri

... and as God reveals the **next step** to live your ONE life well ...

Amy

... we'll be cheering you on ...

Amy 'n' Cheri

So TAKE IT!