Most people have realized that in the past 30 years the number of children raised by their grandparents has doubled. According to the U.S. Census, 6.5 million or 9% of children younger than 18 years old are living in homes that include at least one grandparent. Today, at least 1.6 million children live in their grandparents’ home without either parent being present.

Why?
Children are raised by grandparents because of parental difficulties such as substance abuse, prison, abuse and neglect, abandonment, HIV/AIDS, mental illness, divorce, and death. Grandchildren come to their grandparent’s care through family circumstances, a child welfare agency, police department, or by legal adoption or guardianship. This change may be sudden or gradual and may occur soon after birth or when the child is older.

What about the children?
Children raised by their grandparents are at increased risk for emotional and behavioral problems in adulthood. Grandchildren have experienced in their early lives divided loyalties, rejection, loss, guilt, and anger. Many of the children in a research study, felt disappointed and hurt by their mother’s inability to spend time together with them.

The Parents
Parents have many different roles when grandparents raise their children. Parents may have little rights to their child, and contact may be illegal. Or they may interact with the child on a daily basis. A common pattern of parental involvement is usually distant, with conflict with the grandparent. Adolescents in this research study described their mothers as immature and selfish, whereas others described them as confidants. Fathers were mostly out of the picture, and the girls felt anger and the boys felt sadness. Many grandchildren distance themselves from their parents. The grandparents in my support group feel that these parents are “stuck in adolescent” and have never grown up to take on their parental responsibility.

Grandchildren explained how theirgrandparents’ love and stability allowed them to succeed in school, stay out of trouble, develop strong morals, and religious values.

The Grandchild-Grandparent Relationship
Grandparents feel close to the grandchildren they are raising. However, the grandparent-grandchild relationship may be difficult when the grandchildren have physical, emotional, or behavioral difficulties. Other research studies have shown that a larger than average number of grandchildren raised by their grandparents have such difficulties, and this could be a reason for abandonment. Timing is a factor, as grandchildren may have stronger bonds with their grandparents when they have lived with them for the majority of their lives. According to Dobbin-MacNab (2009, 169), “grandchildren explained how their grandparents’ love and stability allowed them to succeed in school, stay out of trouble, develop strong morals, and religious values.” Grandchildren not only love and show affection to their grandparents but they emphasized in this research study the deep gratitude and respect for their grandparents efforts in raising them. The early adolescent grandchild did describe the generation gap, strict expectations, and limitations of the age and health of grandparents as challenges of the relationship.

Community Response
Grandchildren raised by their grandparents have unique needs that may require the use of therapists, school counselors, and health care providers. Classroom teachers need to be aware of the child’s family background to facilitate learning. Grandparents and grandchildren may benefit from support groups, individual or family therapy to share their feelings and gain support.