

The Greatest Gift



Grandparents across the state are opening their hearts, and homes, to their grandchildren.

For most children, interacting with grandparents is a fun, if occasional, treat. Some live close enough to visit several times a week, but many live far away, and see their grandparents only when their parents take them on an interstate trek for a vacation or weekend reunion.

However, for 5.8 million American children, contact with their grandparents occurs each and every day. They live in their grandparents' home – with or without their parents. Ten percent of grandparents are raising their grandchildren full time.

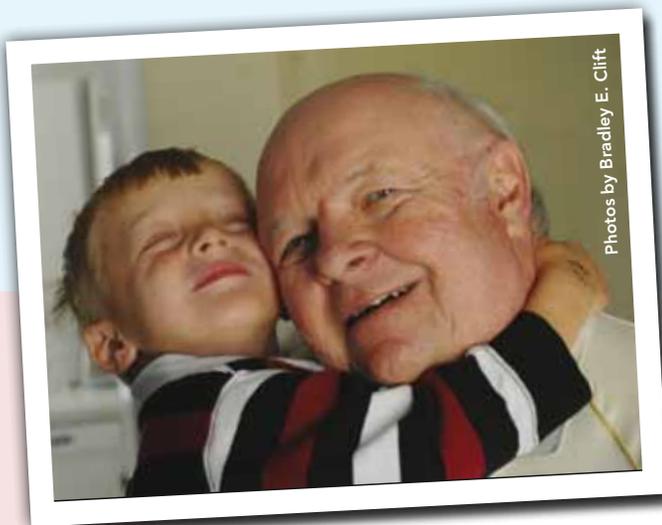
In some cases, the situation is temporary. A parent may be sick, in the throes of a divorce, serving in the military, or in the midst of a long-distance move, having gone on ahead to set up a new home and allow the kids to finish out the school year.

Often, the situation is a permanent one, due to the parents' premature death, illness or incapacitation. The parents may suffer from substance abuse or be in jail. They may have abused or abandoned their kids, or they may be too young or financially unable to support them.

For older adults, stepping back into a parental role can be challenging, but the rewards are significant. It offers a second chance at parenting – with the benefit of lessons learned the first time around. For some, caring for grandkids gives a renewed sense of purpose as they provide their young family members with shelter, guidance and love. It's also a way for older adults to stay young and remain active, as they take younger kids to the playground, or attend high school plays.

Of course, the most important reason is the opportunity to make a difference in the life of a child – a child who is not only a member of the family but has experienced some kind of loss or trauma. Taking in a grandchild keeps that child in the family circle, with people who knew and loved their parents.

Studies show that children who are no longer able to live with their parents adjust best when they remain with grandparents or other relatives. Opening your heart and home can mean the difference between no future – and a bright one – for your grandchildren.



Stepping Up

For many Connecticut grandparents, taking care of their grandchildren is a full-time job.

*By DCF Deputy Commissioner
Janice Gruendel*



DCF Deputy Commissioner Janice Gruendel with her husband and some of their grandchildren

Many Americans today have to go no farther than their own families to understand the vital and sometimes vulnerable role of grandparents in the lives of children – especially those who take on the daily responsibility of raising their grandchildren.

How many Connecticut grandparents are raising their grandchildren? I went to the website of the U.S. Census Department to find out.

In Connecticut, just over 61,000 grandparents live with their grandchildren. One in three are actually responsible for raising their grandchildren. That's about 20,000 grandparents.

Of these 20,000 Connecticut grandparents, about 6,000 are 60 years of age or older. And, even if 60 is the “new 50” in terms of age, the daily care of kids is a big and exhausting endeavor. Raising children today is also expensive, and many grandparents raising their

grandchildren (or their nephews and nieces) did not plan their retirement around this expense – if they have much of a base of financial resources for retirement at all.

How many children are being raised by their grandparents in Connecticut? Census data reveal that nearly 40,000 children from birth through adolescence are being raised by grandparents.

To really get a sense of the magnitude of this, think about it this way. The average school bus carries 56 children. If we put all of the children in Connecticut being raised by their grandparents on school buses, it would take more than 700 school buses. If they were lined up end to end, the line of school buses would be five miles long.

That's a lot of grandchildren and a lot of grandparents, many of whom very likely need much more support than we are providing.

I didn't know my own grandparents very well. All of them were first generation

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Americans, having immigrated from Poland and Germany. My mother's mother didn't even speak English, and we didn't speak Polish.

As a grandparent myself, I am determined to be present in the lives of my grandchildren. As Deputy Commissioner in the Connecticut Department of Children and Families, I am determined to be a positive voice for the many grandparents who care for their grandchildren every day.

Giving Love, Getting Help

Grandparents raising their grandchildren have been described as the “silent generation,” being present every day to provide a safe, caring home while often facing some very real challenges. There is help, both in Connecticut and from organizations at the national level.



Real Challenges

Studies show that the most frequent challenge facing grandparents raising their grandchildren is financial, especially for older people living on a pension or a fixed income. Other challenges include adjusting to the emotional and physical demands of caring for children who are angry, sad or depressed as the result of being separated from their parents. Grandparenting families may also need help with housing and legal issues.

Resources

There are many places to go for help. If you are a relative foster family licensed by the Connecticut Department of Children and Families, we can help with many of these challenges, including some of the costs of raising your grandchildren – like food, clothing, child care, health care and education. For more information, call your assigned worker or the DCF subsidy unit at 1-800-842-6348. For complex situations, you can call the DCF Ombudsman at 866-637-4737.

Read on for a list of other resources.

The DCF website at www.fosteradopt.com has a link to a report entitled, “Community Services Providers and Advocates that Support Kinship Families in Connecticut.” This report was produced by Generations United and lists services in each community.

AARP

AARP’s website includes fact sheets on kinship care in each state as well as a GrandCare Support Locator listing of 43 Connecticut organizations helping grandparents.
888-687-2277
www.aarp.org

Casey Family Programs

Casey’s Kinship Caregiver Resources website offers a Benefits Quick Link, a link to the Grandfamilies State Law and Policy Resource Center, and more.
206-282-7300
www.casey.org/Families/KinshipCaregivers/Resources.htm

Connecticut Association of Foster and Adoptive Parents (CAFAP)

This organization can connect you with services right in your community.
800-861-8838
www.CAFAP.com

Connecticut Commission on Aging

This commission is working to help older citizens, including grandparents, at the policy and legislative level. One of its efforts is called the Elder Action Network.
860-240-5200
www.cga.ct.gov/coa

Department of Social Services

This state agency manages financial aid programs as well as access to health care and childcare. Three of these programs are

Temporary Family Assistance, HUSKY Health plan and the Care 4 Kids program. The Division of Aging Services can direct you to many services and supports.
860-424-5540; 877-CT-HUSKY;
888-214-5437 or 888-218-6631
www.ct.gov/dss; agingservices.dss@ct.gov

Generations United

The vision of Generations United is a “world that values and engages all generations.” On its website, you can learn about Seniors4Kids and the challenges facing kinship caregivers.
202-289-3979
www2.gu.org

GrandFamilies of America

This national organization is exclusively directed at helping adults caring 24/7 for relative children placed in their care. This group’s website includes a lot of useful information on legal and legislative issues as well as connections to other national organizations whose work can help support grandparents raising their grandchildren.
866-203-8926, ext. 8103
<http://grandfamiliesofamerica.com>

United Way of Connecticut’s Infoline

Call the United Way, tell them what you need, and a knowledgeable person will provide you with names and telephone numbers, and may even be able to help you make the connections. 2-1-1 also has a helpful online Benefits Navigator.
2-1-1
www.211ct.org

Isaiah and Nevaeh



Photo by Bradley E. Clift

When Miriam Parsons grew up in the 1950s and '60s, family-oriented TV shows like *Ozzie and Harriet* and *Leave It to Beaver* ruled the airwaves.

The television sitcoms were largely a reflection of American society, in which families stayed together, and “everyone had a dad at home,” the Trumbull woman said.

So it’s little wonder that Miriam’s mind is “always centered on family, because of my upbringing, the church, and the wholesome TV families,” which were her anchors, growing up.

But when her son and daughter left home as young adults, she found herself with an empty nest. “They left me so fast,” said the native of Puerto Rico.

Later on, however, when Miriam’s own daughter proved unable to care for her children – Isaiah, 12, and his sister Nevaeh, 4 – they came to stay with grandma.

It hasn’t all been smooth sailing, as Nevaeh was born with health issues. Isaiah needs much support to stay focused and struggles with academics, like reading and math.

But with the care and devotion of their grandmother, Nevaeh – whom Miriam has adopted – is now thriving in preschool and at home, while her brother has also settled nicely into a loving, supportive environment and has improved academically.

A court has granted Miriam legal guardianship of Isaiah, although she is

not his foster mother.

“I’m trying to pave a good future for them,” Miriam said. “I try to instill in them everything I’ve learned. I concentrate on their wellbeing.

“They give me a lot of laughs,” she said. And when Nevaeh calls her “Mom,” it makes Miriam “feel really good.”

But life didn’t always look so rosy. In the early 1970s, when she worked at the Bridgeport Hospital’s emergency room, Miriam saw many children who had been physically, emotionally, or sexually abused.

“When you see so many children who need help, you get to see what’s really going on in the world,” she said. “That experience “planted a seed in me. You didn’t want to see this happen to other kids.”

Around 2003 – even before her own grandchildren came to live with her – Miriam began to provide a safe haven for the first of nearly 20 youngsters who needed foster parenting and love.

Many of those children, who stayed with her for varying periods of time, came with medical and behavioral issues. At first, some feel “confused and worried” about the situation they are in, she said. “They keep their guard up.”

The hurt that they carry with them is “heartbreaking” at times, Miriam said. Children from broken homes often miss their parents terribly, and “come with such negativity, that you must put them on a positive path.” But “you keep

guiding them ... to help them visualize a better future.”

Single since her divorce many years ago, Miriam has shouldered the child care responsibility herself – with the help of the Department of Children and Families – which should help dispel the myth that only couples can be foster parents.

“The DCF was always wonderful with me,” Miriam said. “We always had to troubleshoot a lot of behavioral issues. They were always there to help.”

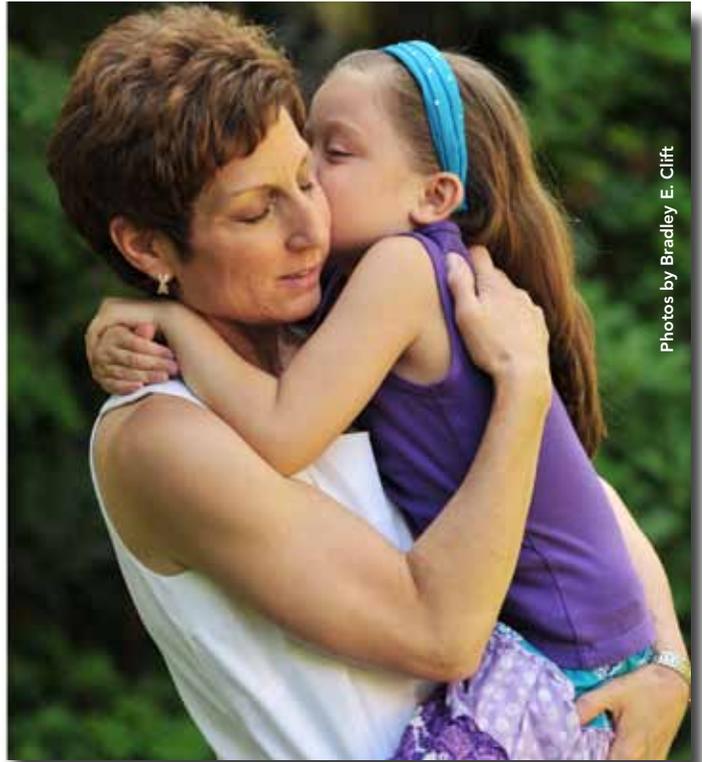
For about the past seven years, she has been a “Medically Complex Provider” who’s been hospital trained to handle a number of medical conditions, including asthma, sickle cell anemia, diabetes, epilepsy and ADHD. She’s also qualified to perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation, or CPR.

A believer in proper nutrition, exercise and rest, rather than pharmaceuticals, Miriam is proud that she’s kept her youngsters on an even keel.

Isaiah agrees that he’s flourished under his grandmother’s care. “Since I’ve been here ... I’m into a routine and I have new friends,” he said. “Me and her get along good.”

One of the things he loves is the “quiet” of his new environment. “When I lived with mom, every night I heard gunshots, sirens, people yelling and screaming,” Isaiah said.

She’s “a pretty good grandma,” he said of Miriam. “I’m happy here.”



Photos by Bradley E. Clift

Mia

When Mia was born, Deborah Tamburri fell in love with her instantly.

“I bonded with that child,” the Westport woman said. “It was total love.”

Yet Deborah had no way of knowing what awaited her granddaughter.

It turned out that both of Mia’s parents suffered from substance abuse. Mia was exposed to unsafe environments and even worried that her father would die. She needed a place to call home.

With her parents often physically, mentally and emotionally unable to look after their child, Mia “had to take care of herself” – dress, feed and entertain herself. “She was on her own.”

So when Mia came to live with her grandmother, it’s no wonder that she was traumatized. “If I was not within her sight, she’d scream for me,” Deborah said. Sometimes, she’d “hide behind a chair and be hysterical.” And

she would hit herself in the head.

But fortunately, through the love and patience of her grandmother, and the expertise and dedication of therapists and other care givers, Mia, now seven, has rebounded.

“She’s a very resilient child. She’s extraordinarily happy” by nature, and she’s a “relentless learner,” said Deborah, who is foster parenting Mia and hopes to adopt her.

Of course, there’s sadness too, “since she doesn’t understand where her mother is.” And sometimes, like all children, she sometimes gets the “noogies,” a term that Deborah uses to describe when Mia is a bit cranky and out of sorts. “I say to her: ‘There are no noogies at Nana’s house.’”

But Mia has come so far in her recovery. Through the Department of Children and Families, the girl had an “amazing social worker,” who

“I’m very, very proud of her, and she’s very proud of herself. I’m very blessed to have her with me. I love her with all my heart.”

Mia embraced, loved and trusted, Deborah said. And DCF personnel were “able to recognize Mia’s needs immediately.”

The Boys & Girls Club village in Bridgeport and the Child Guidance Center of Mid-Fairfield County in Norwalk have also been instrumental in Mia’s revival, utilizing a behavioral specialist and other therapists to explore the girl’s feelings and allow her to express them.

Today, she writes her feelings in a journal, rather than bottling them up inside – that is, when she’s not riding her bike or doing ballet, just like a regular girl.

“I’m very, very proud of her, and she’s very proud of herself,” Deborah said. “I’m very blessed to have her with me. I love her with all my heart.”



Photo by Bradley E. Clift

Quinten

After a lifetime of raising their own five children, no one would have blamed Walter and Laurelee Brown if they had turned aside the responsibility of raising their grandson Quinten too.

In fact, when the soon to be 4-year-old needed a home, the Cheshire couple had to weigh their options. There were financial and emotional issues and concerns, Walter said.

“A lot of responsibility and commitment comes along with that,” he said. “We had to weigh a lot of things at our age.”

“But in the end, there was no way we could let him go,” said Laurelee. “We felt it would keep us on our toes and keep us younger,” even though “at times, it’s exhausting.”

Quinten needed help because his parents “made poor decisions” because of their issues with substance abuse, his grandfather said. So the Browns became his foster grandparents and, later, his court-appointed legal guardians.

“Emotionally, he seems very well adjusted to the situation,” Walter said of his grandson. And physically, the boy also seems fine, although there were some concerns about him having drugs in his system, when he was born a couple of weeks prematurely.

The youngster is a “witty little boy and can be pretty funny in what he talks about ... and what he remembers,” Laurelee said. “He’s very comfortable with us. He’s very loving.”

As anticipated, the Browns some-

times find their energetic grandson difficult to keep up with. “It can be a physically hard thing at times for us,” said Laurelee. “But it’s fun.”

They noted that the Department of Children and Families has provided invaluable support. DCF staff members are “all very professional and interested in Quinten’s wellbeing,” Walter said. “If we had any questions, they always followed through with the answers.”

If other people also feel they can provide the care and support a child needs, “they should take a long hard look at [doing] that. It’s a very rewarding experience. Just be prepared and weigh all the options,” Walter said.

While it may mean a change in lifestyle, making a commitment for a child is vitally important, he said.



Learn more about fostering and adopting through DCF by calling 1-888-KID-HERO or visit the DCF website at www.ctfosteradopt.com

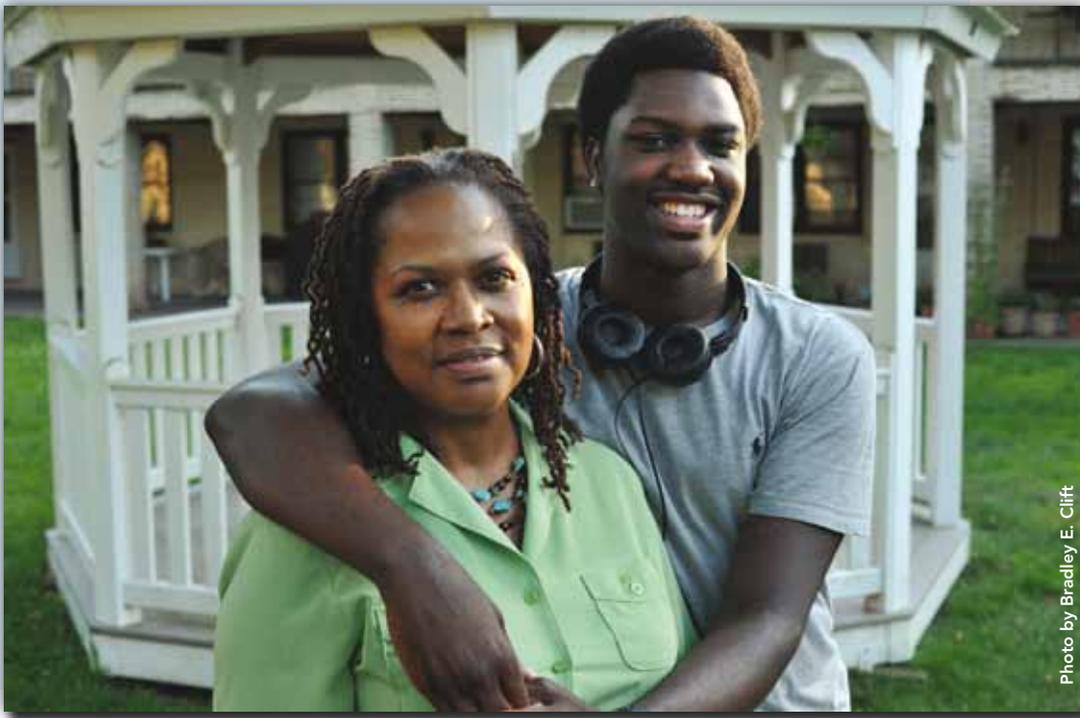


Photo by Bradley E. Clift

Henry

Henry has called his grandmother a “drill sergeant.” Ethel admits that she’s “a big pain at times.” But she doesn’t regret using tough love to keep Henry on the proper path after his father Gerard – her only child – died in 2002.

Henry was just 5 years old when his first DCF-sanctioned stay with her began in 1998. She served as his court appointed guardian until the end of 2000. After his father’s death, when Henry was just 9, he stayed with his mother, Jacqueline, for several years.

But in 2008, when Jacqueline could no longer care for him, Henry returned to his grandmother and became her official foster child in 2009.

Describing her grandson as “a sharp, bright kid ... who could’ve gone in any direction,” Ethel said she “stepped in at that critical time, when he was an at-risk youth.”

Even though Henry, now 19, has lived with his grandmother since he was just a baby, on and off, there were some trying times. “It’s always difficult when a child is separated from his mother,” she said. “The challenge was working through Henry’s emotional state.”

But Ethel – a retired postal worker and divorcee, who interrupted her training to become a psychotherapist to care for Henry – gladly accepted the challenge. “His future was more

important,” she said.

Even so, “there was some head butting,” she recalled. “There was resistance. For a while, he wasn’t going to school.” However, she was “able to devote the time to Henry, to help him adjust, and her firm approach helped him to become more stable.

Today, Henry, who has wanted to become a lawyer since he was just a little boy, has completed his first year of college, focusing on criminal justice courses. A law degree awaits him.

Despite his occasional griping about his grandmother, it’s obvious that he loves her. “My grandmother is like my other mom,” Henry said. “The experience has been great.” And although he keeps in contact with his birth mother, if he had stayed with her, “I think I would have been in trouble.”

“It’s a joy to have my grandson with me,” said Ethel, who credits the Department of Children and Families for helping to make it possible. DCF provided Henry with counseling to help him adjust to the loss of his father, and with a mentor. “Wonderful social workers” helped Ethel prepare for her grandson’s latest arrival and relocate to a larger dwelling.

DCF was there for Ethel and Henry “when it was really crucial,” she said. “I [always] had someone at my side.”

DCF Offices

Central Office

Hartford
505 Hudson Street 06106
(860) 550-6300

Region 1

Bridgeport
100 Fairfield Avenue 06604
(203) 384-5300

Norwalk

149 Water Street 06854
(860) 899-1400

Stamford

401 Shippan Avenue 06902
(203) 348-5865

Region 2

Milford
38 Wellington Road 06461
(203) 306-5300

New Haven

One Long Wharf Drive 06511
(203) 786-0500

Region 3

Middletown
2081 South Main Street 06457
(860) 638-2100

Norwich

2 Courthouse Square 06360
(860) 886-2641

Willimantic

322 Main Street 06226
(860) 450-2000

Region 4

Hartford
250 Hamilton Street 06106
(860) 418-8000

Manchester

364 West Middle Turnpike 06040
(860) 533-3600

Region 5

Danbury
131 West Street 06810
(203) 207-5100

Torrington

62 Commercial Boulevard 06790
(860) 496-5700

Waterbury

395 West Main Street 06702
(203) 759-7000

Region 6

Meriden
One West Main Street 06451
(203) 238-8400

New Britain

One Grove Street 06053
(860) 832-5200

DCF Facilities

Middletown

Connecticut Juvenile Training School
1225 Silver Street 06457
(860) 638-2400

Albert J. Solnit Center South

1225 Silver Street 06457
(860) 704-4000

East Windsor

Albert J. Solnit Center North
36 Gardner Street 06088
(860) 292-4000

Giovani

For Carmen Ramos and her husband, Juan Jiminez, grandson Giovani Vasquez came as quite a surprise. There were no joyful preparations underway when the baby boy, now one year old, entered the world in June 2011.

His young mother and Carmen's son were both unable to care for the baby, so Giovani, who needed medical attention, stayed at the hospital. "We didn't know he was my grandson before a DNA test" confirmed it, Carmen said.

There was never any question that Carmen and Juan, who reside in New Haven, would step into the breach to become his foster parents.

But that's not the end of the story. Giovani has a condition called gastroschisis, a birth defect in which an infant's intestines stick out of the body through the abdominal wall. It's a type of hernia. At nine months old, he was still in the hospital, where he had spent all of his young life. Babies with this condition typically face a long recovery time because even after the bowel is physically relocated, it takes time for bowel function to return to normal. For quite some time, he was nourished through a feeding tube. He couldn't even be fed from a bottle, as most infants can.

Still, his grandparents were eager to see Giovani come home, where he belonged. Their wish was granted on April 3, 2012, when the boy was nearly 10 months old.

"He's doing very well," Carmen said. Although he still has a feeding tube, he can "eat a little bit now," mostly soft carrots and some milk from a bottle. Otherwise, he does everything a normal child does. I'm very happy to have him home with me."

Since Giovani's birth, there have been many times when "it's been rough." Along with his health issues, there were medical costs involved. But the Department of Children and Families came through, providing financial assistance to the family.

"They are very good people," she said. "Any time we need them, they will help us out."

Carmen has no regrets. He's "a little miracle," she said of Giovani. When he's old enough, the Puerto Rican couple plans to adopt him, and even wants to adopt another child.

What is it like having a baby in the house again? "It's wonderful. We are so happy," she said. "There are a lot of children out there who need our love and support. We have a lot of love to give."

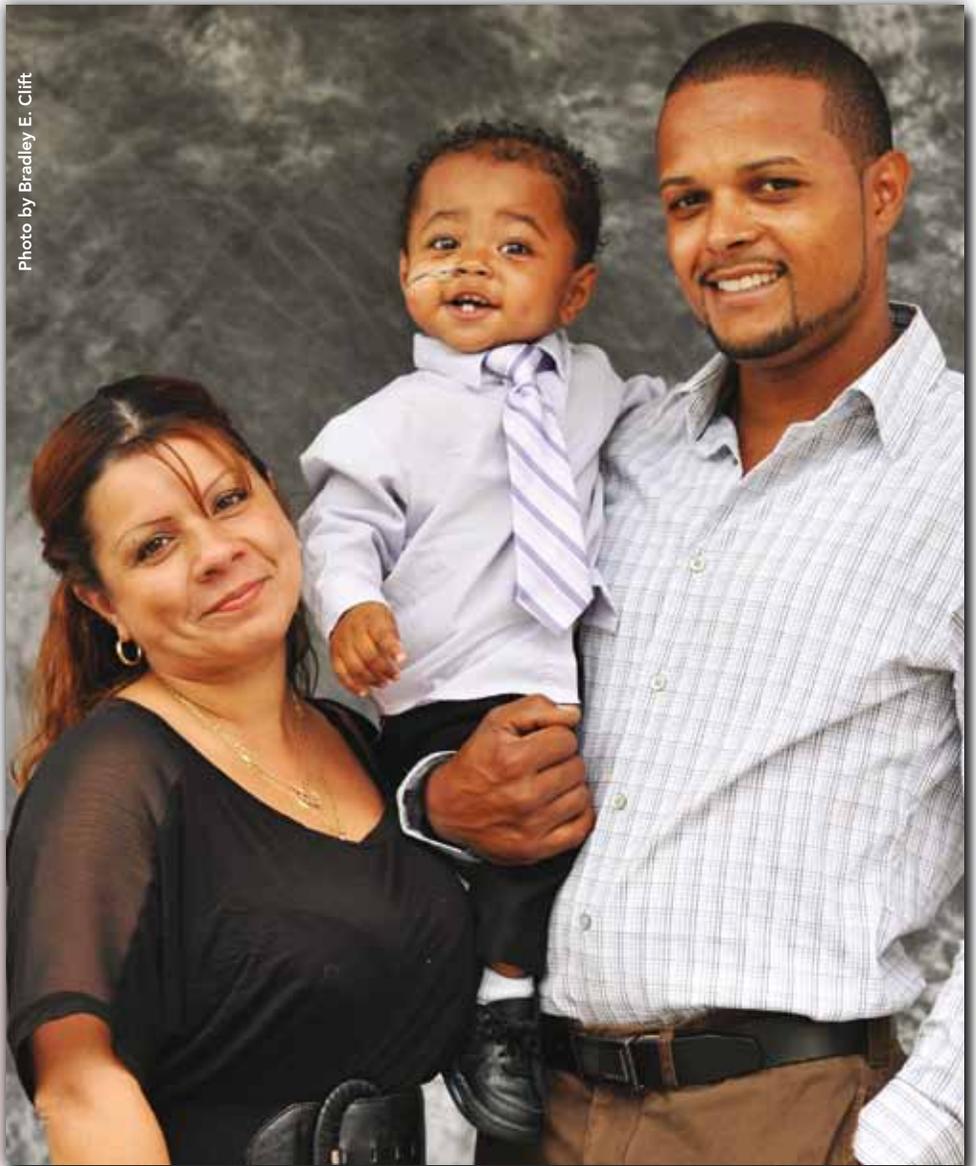


Photo by Bradley E. Clift

Better Together

All of us know families, our own included, who need help at some point in their lives. Very often, grandparents fill this need.

Some of these grandparents will be a part of the DCF kinship care system, and we welcome them completely. Others will turn to their neighbors, their churches and their communities for support and assistance.

The bottom line is that no grandparents should have to "go it alone" when responding to the needs of their families,

and we can *all* help.

Imagine how strong our collective voice would be for vulnerable children and families if our generations could unite with leadership from our elders. Imagine more than half a million Connecticut seniors speaking up for their 20,000 peers who are raising their grandchildren right now ... Oh, what a song they could sing!

DCF offers congratulations to all Connecticut grandparents on National Grandparents Day, 2012. We are all better together.