

The New Norm - A day in the life of a multi-generational family

Written by Stephanie Groves
Saturday, March 02, 2013 2:21 AM -



This is the second in a series examining multi-generational household dynamics. The people in this story are folks living in our community. Their names have been changed to protect their identity.

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DELPHOS —They come from all walks of life. No matter their culture, economic or social status or family structure, these are the people who are doing more with less, giving an abundance of their time caring for others and most of the time, setting their own needs aside for the sake of their loved ones. These are the families that are inter-weaved into the fabric of our community.

The Rigors of the Day

Glug, glug, glug, glug, glug. It's 5 a.m. in the morning and Karl, 46, also known as Papa, stands at the kitchen counter pouring juice into his 2-year old grandson's colorful sippy cup. After putting the juice container away, he carries the sippy cup to the bedroom he and his wife share with Alex, his grandson.

It is standard procedure that the little man leaves his own bed and snuggles in with Papa and Mama during the wee hours of the night. As Alex lies in bed with Mama (Theresa), Karl places the sippy cup on the bedside table and firmly plants a pillow against Alex to prevent him from rolling to the opposite edge of the bed.

"It's pretty normal," Karl explained. "By 5:15 a.m., I'm out the door and going to work."

Five days a week, Theresa, 44, hits the ground running. In the morning, she helps her son, Ethan, who attends grade school, and daughter, Maria, who is in high school, with their morning regimens all the while attending to her grandson's needs. In addition, she gets herself ready for a busy day at work.

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After the morning ritual full of a flurry of activity is complete, everyone gathers their coats, books, backpacks — don't forget the diaper bag and bottles — and shuffles out the door piling into the minivan.

“The house is like a zoo — a bunch of animals,” Theresa said jokingly, yet with a serious tone.

Theresa makes sure everyone is secure in their seat and sets off for her destinations delivering each child to their respective school. First Ethan and then Maria are dropped off before the bell at 8 a.m. Theresa then drives to the babysitter's house, where she spends 10-15 minutes unloading and delivering Alex and all the daily necessities to the baby's caregiver. After a brief conversation about his new tooth poking through his lower gum, slight nasal congestion or a particularly funny singing performance from the night before, Theresa is off and running to clock in at her place of employment.

This scenario probably sounds very common to most people, with exception of the grandson, Alex, whose mother is Shelly, Karl and Theresa's eldest daughter. As a matter of fact, at approximately 7:20 a.m. through the week, Shelly, 22, is just getting home from working third shift. At this point, Theresa and the kids are finishing breakfast and ready to sprint from the house to get their days started. Mostly, Shelly gets her rest through the day and takes care of chores and other responsibilities later in the day.

By 4:30 p.m. everyone is home. The kids are playing together and the adults are thinking about dinner.

“Alex is more like one of our kids rather than a grandkid,” Karl described the close bond shared with all members of the family. “Everyone (Aunt Maria and Uncle Ethan) takes care of him; whatever he wants, he rules the roost.”

Shelly is awake and also spending time caring for Alex, which gives Theresa and Karl, depending on who's turn it is to prepare dinner, time to devise a meal plan. Since

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Alex is lactose intolerant, meals have to accommodate his special dietary needs.

“We cook around that,” Theresa explained.

Once dinner is over, the cleanup begins; dishes, trash, straightening up and putting toys away.

“The kids each have chores and the follow-through with them can sometimes be a challenge,” Karl mused. “It’s a little crowded. There’s more toys than three kids should have.

As the evening progresses, Karl and Theresa might be running the kids to a sports practice or game or tutoring Ethan with his coursework or taking the whole family on a trip to shop for groceries.

The Balancing Act

The couple have limited personal time — spending quality time together or pursuing individual interests — so, they take advantage of any free time they can get. Karl has a home gym set up in the basement, which provides him a limited amount of personal space and time for reflection a few days a week for about an hour. The space is not off limits to the kids and infrequently, one of them might come downstairs during a workout and watch television. Both Karl and Theresa would like more time for their relationship.

“It’s rare to have time together and be alone,” Theresa glanced at her husband. “More time would be nice.”

Communication is key. For Karl and Theresa, there is little time for chit chat let alone a very important conversation demanding their undivided attention. While the family is at home — which is most of the time — it is impossible to have a continuous dialogue. “It’s tough when everybody wants something at the same time,” Theresa explained. Both Karl and Theresa agreed. The majority of their conversations take place driving to and from work. Both have

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some flexibility with their jobs when it comes to squeezing some time into their schedules to handle family matters.

“Important conversations, requiring limited interruptions, are via phone during work breaks,” Theresa added.

Another factor to consider is the amount of time Karl and Theresa devote to caring for Shelly and Alex. At times, Karl gets a sense that Ethan and Maria may feel slighted because of Shelly and Alex living under the same roof and not getting that attention they are looking for. Whether it’s changing a diaper, providing medical care, or bathing in bubbles, Theresa spends three to four hours a day providing support for the little guy.

“He’s just like my kid,” Theresa exclaimed. “If he needs his nails clipped, I just take care of it.”

All things considered, Karl and Theresa feel that most of the dynamics are manageable, however; there are a few unresolved issues when it comes to Shelly’s parental role and responsibilities.

“She doesn’t do the baby’s laundry but she does her own?” Theresa mused. “She should be the mother and take care of it.”