

TIES THAT BIND Grandparenting Today

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Grandparenting has become a phenomenon of middle age rather than old age. As such, grandparents may be experiencing some mid-life crises of their own such as career change, divorce, widowhood, dating, remarriage, or health problems. They also may be concerned about the care of their own older parents.

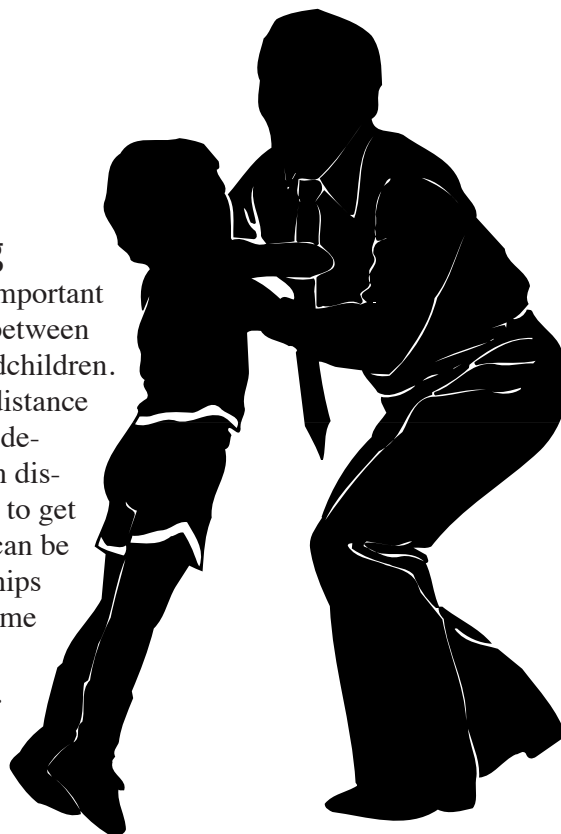
Increased mobility of families means that generations may live apart. Geographic separation makes the relationship grandchildren have with grandparents different from how it was when generations lived in the same town all their lives. Nevertheless, modern communication and travel make it possible for them to be emotionally close.

Modern grandchildren come in all ages, not just the smiling baby. They are in all stages of development—the “terrible twos,” the cooperative and talkative 9-year-old, and the contrary teenage years. They are even “middle aged.” Some people in their 40s still have grandparents living.

Long-distance Grandparenting

Communication is important in creating a close tie between grandparents and grandchildren. Increased geographic distance does not have to mean decreased bonding. When distance makes it difficult to get together, other means can be used to build relationships with grandchildren. Some are:

- Telephone regularly.
- Send postcards or letters addressed to the child.
- Exchange books you have enjoyed. Keep an eye out for books that would appeal to the grandchild’s age and interests.
- Record audio or video tapes as “letters.”
- Become computer-literate and “talk” to grandchildren via the Internet.
- Do something unexpected—write poetry, or send telegrams, flowers, homemade gifts...anything that reminds them you care.



- Send grandchildren old pictures of you and/or their parents, and a little story of your life or philosophy.

When grandparents have close ties with their children, regardless of geographic separation, they are likely to be important to their grandchildren even if they do not see each other often.

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Visits with Grandchildren

Visits can give you a chance to have talks and share experiences. Visits also can be exhausting. Try these hints for making a visit at your house more manageable:

- *Prepare for the visit.* Put away hazardous material (cleaning supplies, medicines, paints, etc.) and valuable items that curious youngsters might damage. Keep housework and other preparations to a minimum so you won't be tired when you need your energy most.
- *Rest before grandchildren arrive.*
- *Establish a workable schedule.* Everyone has habits of sleeping, eating, resting, and other regular activities. Look at your schedule and your grandchild's schedule. Plan only a few minor adjustments for the visit. Disruptions of routines can be unsettling. Children feel secure in a routine if they know why you think it's important. Rest when the children nap or when older grandchildren are "doing their own thing."
- *Provide some private space.* Everyone needs a place to call her or his own. Provide your grandchild with some space to

keep toys, a favorite blanket, a pillow, and stuffed animals. One grandmother keeps toys and dress-up clothes in an old suitcase, which is easy to get out and put away. If you have teenage grandchildren, have a private place for them to listen to their music or look at books or magazines they choose. Explain which areas are theirs and which are yours.

- *Provide space to be near you.* Grandchildren want to be part of the action. Provide a place where they can be near, but not in the way. A table and chair in the kitchen allows young children to draw, look at books, or play with clay while you cook or visit with friends and family.
- *Share favorite foods.* We all remember Grandma's best recipes, so be sure to share these favorites with your grandchildren. As they get older, perhaps they can help you prepare the recipe. Find out what foods your grandchildren like and are used to having at home. Be sure to have a few of these favorites on hand, too.
- *Plan simple activities.* Younger children enjoy simple things that become special because they're shared with grandparents. A short walk around the neighborhood, a trip to the library, a picnic in a nearby park, or looking at a photo album are all fun, inexpensive, and easily managed. You also might have rainy day supplies available such as color crayons, colored paper, glue, tape, play dough, paints, sacks, etc. Older grandchildren may enjoy computer

activities, remote-control cars or trucks, magazines, and videos.

- *Learn to say "no"* or you will fatigue more easily. You don't need to do everything your grandchild wants you to do.
- *Discipline.* Ideally, your disciplining of grandchildren should be consistent with parental discipline. However, your home, routine, and rules should be respected.

Visiting your grandchildren's home can give you a chance to see how they live and where they play, go to school, or work. Encourage them to keep a workable schedule, too. Sometimes families think they need to entertain you with trips and tourist activities. If what you really want to do is stay home and visit, be sure to share these feelings.

Step-grandparenting

For many families that have gone through divorce and remarriage, the role of step-grandparent has become important. Some become as close as blood relatives. Others (especially if the marriage is late in the child's life) can be of little importance.

Step-grandparents should not be pressured into conforming to a stereotypical grandparent role. They can be one of a number of positive role models and sources of support for their new grandchildren. Common sense, willingness to compromise, and a sense of humor can turn a complicated family network into calm and loving relationships.

Cooperation among Grandparents

Because life expectancy has increased, there may be several grandparents, great-grandparents, or step-grandparents involved in the lives of grandchildren. Grandparents should be willing to share grandchildren. The variety of grandparenting styles broadens children's learning. Cooperate rather than compete with each other.

Role of Grandparents

Grandparents can be puzzled about their role. Many want to be helpful to their grandchildren, but they are uncertain of how to fit into the modern family. The following are some points to consider as you decide what kind of grandparent you want to be.

- *Accept that parents have the final responsibility for your grandchildren.* Unless you care for the grandchildren day after day in the absence of their own mother or father, parents should have the final word on how their children are to be reared. Grandparents should never disregard family rules in the child's home.
- *Do not undermine the authority of parents in matters of discipline.* Grandparents sometimes want to be more lenient than parents.
- *Establish your house rules.* Children's misbehavior in the grandparent's home places more responsibility on grandparents. This is particularly true if the parents do not take action. House rules should be established and communicated to

grandchildren and their parents.

- *Be willing to let each generation of parents make its own mistakes.* Families differ in their ways of child rearing. It's hard to stand by and watch young parents proceed on a course destined to end in unhappiness. However, unless advice or assistance is requested, the grandparent must be willing to allow freedom—even the freedom to make mistakes. Grandparents should recall that they seldom listened to their own parents, and that they also made mistakes. The important elements in the family are love and mutual respect.
- *Do not compete for the loyalty and love of your grandchildren with their parents.* It's dangerous and unkind to come between children and their parents. Do not turn grandchildren against their parents or try to recast them in your image. If you find your life centering too much on your grandchildren, develop interests and friendships outside the family.
- *Live your own life.* Being a grandparent is not a full-time career. Continue to live a separate life of your own. Keep up with your old friends and make new ones. Pay attention to your appearance. Cultivate personal interests: reading, music, a course of study, crafts, club membership, volunteer service, a paying job, or community projects.
- *Keep up-to-date.* Don't tell children how much better things were in the "old

days." Make an effort to keep up with the ways life has changed or even improved. Try to understand the "world" as experienced by your children and grandchildren. Avoid being judgmental.

- *Earn respect by contributing to the well-being of the family.* Showing favorites can create a problem in the family and between siblings. When you do something nice for one, do something nice for the others.
- *Babysit on your own terms.* Some grandparents enjoy babysitting their grandchildren while others do not. Share your feeling with your children. Nothing good comes from letting oneself be used. Love can be shown in dozens of ways besides babysitting.

Ten Best Gifts for Grandchildren

1. The Gift of Self-worth.

Children feel great when their grandparents give them positive recognition. When grandparents treasure their accomplishments, children feel special and worthwhile.

2. The Gift of Example. If grandchildren admire their grandparents, they may assume some of their values and copy what they do at a later time.



- 3. **The Gift of Caring.** Grandparents can show grandchildren they care by providing support when needed. Loving and caring grandparents can, for example, help a young child overcome the threat of a new baby in the home or provide a sense of stability and security during difficult times in the family. Grandparents may be able to provide what their grandchildren need because they may have a more objective view of the situation.
- 4. **The Gift of Growing Older Gracefully.** When children have pleasant experiences with older people who approach aging with excitement and good humor, they have a more positive view of growing older themselves.
- 5. **The Gift of Knowledge.** Grandparents may have special skills they can share with their grandchildren. Children like to learn from real “masters,” and grandparents can provide that opportunity.
- 6. **The Gift of Change.** Grandparents are experts in change. They may have seen the first televisions, the first computers, and the first space flights. By sharing memories of these experiences, grandparents can help children understand that life is always full of change.
- 7. **The Gift of Heritage.** Whether they live many miles away from their grandchildren or just down

the block, grandparents can do much to give children a feeling of family and a sense of security and belonging. Grandparents can enrich the lives of other family members by providing continuity between past, present, and future as they share memories about the days when their children were young.

- 8. **The Gift of Hope.** Because of their extensive life experience, grandparents can give young people a sense of hope for the future. By sharing their trials and tribulations, older people help children understand that they too can overcome difficulties.
- 9. **The Gift of Happy Memories.** Warm moments with grandparents can be special memories — experiences that provide strength during difficult times. Kind words, loving gestures, and special times create fond memories that last a lifetime.
- 10. **The Gift of Love and Acceptance.** It means a lot to know that whether you fail a test, break a glass, or lose a ball game, grandparents still love and accept you. The gift of “I love you, no matter what,” whether spoken aloud, written in a letter, or shown by deeds, will be the most treasured and remembered present of all.

For More Information

OSU Extension Publications

Sharing the Responsibilities of Parent Care: Sibling Relationships in Later Life, EC 1458-E. Available only online.

Long-lasting Marriages: Why Do They Survive? EC 1460-E. Available only online.

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