

Grandparenting: More than cookies & milk

Being a grandparent is one of the special joys of growing older. As one grandmother put it, "It's like the dessert at the end of a good meal." It's the only relationship in which people are crazy about each other simply because they're breathing, says Dr. Arthur Kornhaber of the Foundation for Grandparenting.



Grandparents still supply cookies, bedtime stories, and warm hugs, but today's grandparents fulfill other roles that are especially important to today's young families. Distance, divorce, working mothers all make a difference in grandparenting in the 90s. Children need the stability, the time, and the caring of grandparents more than ever.

"Grandma has time for me"

The majority of today's families with young children are busier than ever before. When both Mom and Dad are working outside the home, they have to spend evenings and weekends catching up on the chores and errands. Grandparents can offer children in these busy families time to be with adults who can give the children companionship, a listening ear, and, perhaps, a calmer lifestyle. One teenage granddaughter puts it this way, "When I go to Grandma's house, she takes time to listen to me. She's always there, and she has time for me."

"Who's the boss?"

From the vantage point of your experience, it's easy to see ways that your son or daughter could do better as a parent. Perhaps you feel that the parent is too strict—or too lenient. But remember, the parent is still the parent. Your fault-finding may cause the parents to spend less time with you. Consequently, you'll also see less of the grandchildren. When you are in their

home, follow the parents' rules; when they visit you and don't discipline the children as you would like, it's up to you to set the rules.

Support during divorce

Divorce has come to mean change and adjustment for more and more children. During the early months and years following a divorce, many children have strong feelings of sadness, loneliness, and anger. The parents are typically so involved with their own feelings and changes that they often do not have time and patience to deal effectively with their children's feelings. For the children, grandparents can be a special source of support and nurture, a "safe harbor in the storm." A special challenge for grandparents following a divorce is to avoid making negative comments about their son or daughter's former spouse. A grandparent can acknowledge that the couple had problems getting along without damaging the child's view of his or her other parent.

Across the miles

Many of today's grandparents must deal with having their grandchildren live at a great distance, rather than down the road or across town. Different methods work for different grandparents. Some methods cost money; others are practically free. The traditional ways of staying in touch include letters, phone calls, and visits. Many families traditionally have children spend a week or so with grandparents during summer vacation. Other families have several generations take vacations together at a cabin or camp where they can renew ties and enjoy one another's company. Some grandparents send audiotapes to grandchildren, who in turn, record messages to send back to Grandma and Grandpa. Other families buy or rent videocameras and share recordings of the grandchildren in both pictures and sound. Whatever ways you decide to keep in touch, the connection between the generations helps both the young and the old.

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Eight best gifts for grandchildren

1. Spend time one-on-one with grandchildren.

The time that grandparents spend individually with each grandchild is special. Time spent in activities appropriate to the child's age will build life-long memories. Spending time can be difficult for grandparents who live at a distance from grandchildren. But short periods spent reading to the child, taking a walk, or playing a board game during family get-togethers can provide some special time for the child.

2. Provide listening for their concerns as well as their joys.

Having an adult who really listens helps build the self-esteem of a child or young person. Asking (and then really listening) about school, projects, or concerns helps open the door for the child to communicate with you. Not only does this kind of communication help build a loving relationship between you and your grandchild, it can mean that the child may turn to you for support or advice during a hard time or when making an important decision.

3. Send special letters and notes just for them.

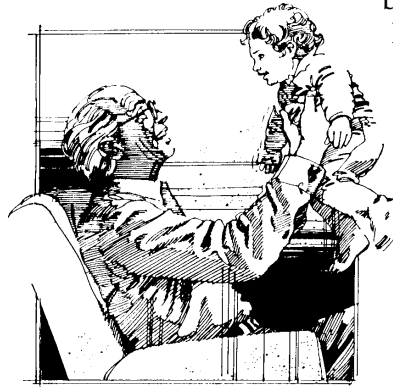
Children love to get something in the mail all their own. Remember birthdays and holidays, but also send notes when nothing special is happening. It may be worth the cost of extra stamps to send letters or cards separately to each child in the family or put each card within its own envelope inside a larger mailing envelope. For very young children you may want to cut out pictures or cartoons to go with your note or send an audiotape.

4. Offer companionship for activities they enjoy.

Companionship can take many forms. For an infant it may mean rocking or playing on the floor. Reading stories not only allows relating to a child, it also helps build skills and knowledge. When the child is able to read, let him or her do the reading to you. Companionship is not just the special things you do for your grandchildren or the places you take them, but also the quiet times when you are together doing ordinary everyday things. Let the child watch or join in as you bake, garden, or work in the shop.

5. Share your history and family traditions.

It helps to give a child security and stability to know that he or she belongs to a larger family with a special history. Share stories about what it was like when you were their age. Tell about great grandparents and their lives, especially stories that help the child see the personal side of those who have gone before. Talk about family traditions and let the child take part in making special food during holidays or events.



6. Be a role model to show grandchildren that older people can be fun.

Children are sometimes afraid of growing older. This is especially true if they see older people who are sick or unhappy. If children have a pleasant experience with elders who approach life with excitement and good humor, they will have a more positive view of growing older.

7. Show grandchildren acceptance just as they are.

One of the special things about grandparents is that they usually do not have to deal with the everyday hassles as parents do. When the child is having trouble at school or at home, a loving grandparent can let the child know, "I love you no matter what." From the wisdom of your experience you can see what parents sometimes cannot see—that the problems or behavior will pass and that the child is a wonderful and special person.

8. The best gift of all—love.

When you take time to be with each grandchild, when you listen to them and write notes, your love will come through. Whether you are near or far, whether you see them often or seldom, children will know how special they are to you. The warm hugs from Grandma or Grandpa can be a special treasure that will always be remembered.

File: Family Life 1

... and justice for all

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