

GRAND parenting



Keep the family networks **alive**

Grandparents are very important people in children's lives. There have been many changes in the last fifty years or so which make grandparenting a whole new ballgame.

If you look at a picture of grandparents from the 1950s, or even later, it is likely to show a grey haired old woman with her knitting or a bald headed old man with a stick. Grandparents today can be as young as in their forties and live an active life for many years. In fact as people live longer, grandparenting can last as many as 30 or 40 years or more. Children are lucky when they have close ties with a grandparent as well as with their parents.

Changes for today's grandparents

Here are some of the major changes that may be part of grandparenting today:






- 👤 Grandparents may be working full-time.
- 👤 Families move around much more and long distance grandparenting is more likely.
- 👤 Children's behaviour, the ways they dress and the language they use have changed.

What grandparents can do for grandchildren

- ★ Spend time with grandchildren in a busy world - time to have fun, time to explore the world and time to just be together.
- ★ Give grandchildren love (without the added burdens of being a parent).
- ★ Grandfathers, in particular, may not have been able to really spend time with their own children in the way that they can with grandchildren.
- ★ Keep the family history alive. Help grandchildren to know where they fit in the world by telling stories about the family history. Tell them stories about their parents when they were young.
- ★ Keep the family networks alive. Keep in touch with all the family members.
- ★ Let the family know about old family traditions as the family grows and changes and new traditions are built. You can help to keep the best of the old, as you and the family work out new ways to manage Christmas celebrations, holidays and birthdays.
- ★ Give security and protection - especially at times when there are family problems. Grandparents can be there for the grandchildren to support and protect them.
- ★ Build grandchildren's self esteem by taking a personal interest in them.

Expectations of grandparents

Grandparents don't have a 'set' role, where they know what their responsibilities are in the same way that parents do. Talk over with your adult children what you expect to do as a grandparent and what they would like you to do. Be open and talk these things over.



-  How often you will visit them or they will visit you.
-  How often you will ring, and when not to ring.
-  What babysitting you will do. (Remember that what you do for the first grandchild may be expected for others). Child care that you really don't want to do may not be a help to anyone. Be prepared to say if it is too much for you, or you need time to yourself. Looking after yourself might mean saying "No" sometimes.
-  What you can afford to do and want to do about presents as the family grows bigger.
-  Listen carefully to your adult children's views on bringing up children and 'fall in line' if you possibly can. It is good to talk about any problems with them. If you think differently, bring up your ideas and listen to theirs. They may not do things the way you would, and you may have to accept this in the end.







The new grandchild

This is a very important time in the lives of your adult children and in your own life.

- Take your cues from them. Your daughter or son and partner may want some time alone to get to know their new baby before they involve other people, so don't just arrive on the doorstep.
- On the other hand they might invite you to be there for the birth. This depends on each family. It does not necessarily show how the parents feel towards the grandparents.
- One of the best things that you can do is to support the new parents in getting to know their baby. It is a time when your practical help with the dishes and the nappies might be more needed than to have you cuddle the baby. Your turn to do the cuddling will come.
- Let the young parents see that you think they are doing a good job when you see them doing things well.
- If the baby is unsettled the young parents may be grateful for help with minding so they can get some breaks. This will be a help for the baby as well, as she gets to know that there are other loving people to care for her.
- When the second baby comes along you can offer to mind the new baby. This will give the parents time to spend with their first child who needs to still feel special.

Grandparenting ideas

-  Your house may no longer be child proof. When grandchildren are young, if they visit you, check that your good things (china and pot plants) and your poisons (from medicines to dishwashing powder) are safely out of reach.
-  Have a box of toys that are special for visits. Add something new occasionally.

-  Children love stories. Keep a supply of books to read to them. Tell stories about the family history.
-  Read a few recent books on child rearing so you are up to date with modern ideas.
-  Keep up with grandchildren's interests. As they grow older take an interest in what they are doing. Listen to some modern music so you can talk about it.
-  Be a good listener. Grandparents often have time to give children a real opportunity to talk about their interests and feelings.
-  Let them know when you are interested in going to their activities, such as school sports, concerts etc.
-  Adolescents, in particular, often get a lot of value out of support from their grandparents. (Remember that hairstyles, activities and language are different from when you were a parent and criticism may spoil your relationship.)

Distance grandparenting






Many families now live a long way apart, with family members working in different states and countries, so you might not be near your grandchildren.

You can still keep the links open and support your grandchildren.

-  Offer to have the grandchildren to visit you on holiday - together or one at a time. Children get benefits from individual relationships with grandparents, not always in a group.
-  Visit them.
-  Keep regular telephone contact.
-  Write letters, send tapes or videos and include family stories in them.
-  Develop some new family traditions for managing birthdays etc.

Separation and step-grandparenting

If your son or daughter's relationship breaks up it can bring special problems for grandparenting.

-  You may feel let down or disappointed or sad and angry. Talk it over with someone, a counsellor if necessary. Your grandchildren are going to need your support at this time.
-  Don't talk to your grandchildren about your disappointment with their parent(s), but listen to their feelings.
-  If your son or daughter is very distressed you may be needed to try to explain to the grandchildren what is happening, and to help them to talk about their feelings. This needs a great deal of tact and sensitivity as both of the couple are your grandchildren's parents. Children usually love and want to be with both their parents.
-  Try to keep positive relationships with both your grandchildren's parents, so that they will want you to go on playing a part in the grandchildren's lives.
-  If your son or daughter remarries there will be other issues to think about. It is important to support the new relationship in front of the children, whatever you think about it.

- ✚ If step grandchildren arrive you will need to think and talk about other things such as:
 - what presents will each of the children receive for birthdays?
 - what will you do about family inheritance?
 - how will you be able to share your time between the grandchildren?

These are individual questions that need to be worked out for your own situation, but it is important that everyone's feelings are considered.

Sometimes grandparents are called on to do the parenting while a son or daughter goes back to work after a separation. If this happens, be sure that you are willing to do it. It will probably be of great value to your grandchildren as long as it is not a burden to you. Some grandparents in this situation resent the fact that it is hard work and they can't do things with their own friends. They worry about what will happen to the grandchildren if they lose their health and cannot continue the child care. Talk these things over with your son or daughter. Get support from a counsellor if necessary.

Your grandchildren may have problems as they struggle with their own feelings. This can show up in their behaviour. Behaviour problems come from unhappiness. It is important to talk this over with the children's parents, so you can get help with managing the children.

Grandparenting when the parents are teenagers

Becoming a grandparent when your teenage child becomes a parent can come as a shock and you may need time to get used to the idea. If you have mixed feelings when you find out you are to become a grandparent, it might help to talk it over with someone who understands.

- ☆ Grandparents-to-be often feel very worried about their young people and how they will cope. You might also be a bit worried about what your friends might think. This is normal.
- ☆ Your teenagers will need your support at this time, but will also need to take their own responsibility for the very grown-up task they are taking on. They need you to help but not take over!
- ☆ Some grandparents find it helpful to talk about feelings with other grandparents who are supporting young parents. You can share your fears and hopes.
- ☆ It is important to consider how much help you want to give. There may be extra pressure on you to offer child care. This is your decision. Child care given with resentment is not in anybody's interests.
- ☆ If the young parent(s)-to-be are agreeable you may be able to be there for the birth and provide positive support.
- ☆ One of the best things that you can do for your young parents is to notice what they do well and tell them.
- ☆ Sometimes you will feel torn in loyalties between your child and your grandchild if you see your grandchild being treated badly. This may mean you have to step in to protect your grandchild and risk conflict in the family.

REMINDERS

FOR GRANDPARENTS

- ☞ Be willing to talk things over.
- ☞ Ask your adult children what kind of help they most need.
- ☞ Support your adult children in their parenting.
- ☞ Notice what they do well and tell them.
- ☞ Ask their advice. Don't expect them to take your advice.
- ☞ One of the best things that you can do for your grandchildren is to support their parents.
- ☞ Grandparenting is a very special relationship. It is an opportunity to do for your grandchildren what you may not have had the time to do for your own children.

FOR PARENTS

- ☆ Ask your own parents (the grandparents) how they would like to be involved with your children.
- ☆ Be willing to talk things over.
- ☆ When you get advice, as you will, don't automatically reject it. Grandparents have had a lot of experience of the world. Think it over and then decide what you will do. If you decide not to take their advice, explain why.
- ☆ Remember that children can adjust to different ways of doing things if you have different rules at your house from the grandparents' house. It is one of the ways they learn about the world. If you think the rules at grandparents' house are too strict and are making your children unhappy, or they are not safe, you will need to explain to the grandparents why you feel that way. Remember that a bit of leeway (or spoiling) by grandparents won't hurt your children or damage their relationship with you.
- ☆ Some grandparents tire easily and managing more than one pre school child for more than a short time may be too much.

BOOKS FOR GRANDPARENTS

'The Australian baby and child care handbook' by Carol Fallows; published by Penguin, 1994.

'The Magic of encouragement' by Stephanie Marsden; published by William Morrow, 1990.