

The Grandparent Connection

The moment you become a parent, you automatically give your own parents a new position: you make them grandparents. Strong connections among the generations surround your child with the security of belonging to an extended family. How your family defines the grandparent role will depend on your particular circumstances.

Degree of interest

Grandparents vary in how involved they want to become. Some older people can hardly wait to have grandchildren. They genuinely look forward to spending time with your little ones. You may welcome their willingness to babysit or even provide child care while you study or work. On the other hand, if you find they are a little *too* eager to participate, you may have to make your limits clear.

Other elders feel that the child-rearing period of their life is over and now it's *your* turn. Some grandparents keep their distance because they don't want to interfere with how you bring up your children. Make the most of whatever interest your parents show, recognizing that the situation may change over time. Some people are not drawn to babies but are quite happy to take an older child to a hockey game.

Availability

Many of today's grandparents don't fit the stereotype of grey-haired stay-at-homes with nothing to do but babysit their grandchildren. They may still be in the workforce or they may be active retirees with busy lives of their own. Health concerns could also restrict the time and energy that older people want to spend with young children. When you respect your parents' limits, the grandparent–grandchild connection can grow without resentments.

Distance

If you live far from your parents, it can be a real challenge to build ties between them and your children. Here are a few suggestions for keeping a long-distance relationship healthy.

- Use email to exchange photos, videos and short notes. Write often, even if it's only a few sentences.
- Use regular mail too, to send photos and drawings that can be posted on the fridge and enjoyed again and again.
- Telephone from time to time, but remember very young children don't say much on the phone.

- If everyone has a computer and webcam, children often have more to say when they can see the other person on the screen.
- Families are busy, so plan to make contact at times that fit everyone's schedule.
- Keep your parents informed about your children's interests (school, sports, books, favourite TV programs, etc.) so that they have something to talk about.
- Get a grandparent to record him or herself reading a story from a library book you suggest. When you play the recording, borrow the same book and turn the pages as you listen with your child.
- Ask your parents to record stories about when you were little, or memories of their own childhood. Can they remember any songs they sang to you as a baby?
- School-aged children might enjoy playing an online word game or chess with a grandparent who is far away.

A fresh start

The quality of your children's relationship with your parents will depend greatly on your own relationship with them. Having a child can bring you closer; you now share the experience of being a parent. On the other hand, if you have very different views about how to bring up children, serious frictions might arise between you and your parents. Open communication is the key to working out these differences. You all probably have the best interests of the children at heart, even if you don't see eye to eye on the best way to achieve them. If you continue to disagree, keep your children out of the conflict. Let them make their own relationship with your parents, unburdened by your complaints.

An enriching bond

When the relationship is positive, children benefit from widening the circle of caring adults who will continue to be present in their lives. Contact with grandparents exposes them to different environments and to points of view based on a long experience of life. If one parent is absent, a grandparent can also provide a missing gender role model.

Older people also gain from getting to know their grandchildren. They build links forward to the future and continue contributing to their family. As a parent in the middle generation, you too will gain from supporting and encouraging these enriching intergenerational connections.

by Betsy Mann