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Being A 'GRAND' Parent

This guide explores grandparenting, including the benefits derived from being a grandparent, suggestions on how to be a good grandparent, precautions to take when grandchildren come for a visit, and ways to have fun with grandchildren.

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"A grandmother is a lady who has no children of her own, so she likes other people's little girls." "A grandfather is 'a man grandmother' who goes for walks with boys, and they talk about fishing and tractors and like that."

"They don't have to be smart, only answer questions like why dogs chase cats and how come God isn't married."

"Everyone should try to have one, especially if you don't have television because grandmas are the only grownups who have got time..."

These are a sample of responses from grandchildren aged seven to thirteen from seven different countries when asked "What are grandparents for?"

Grandparents Today

Approximately 75 percent of Americans over 65 have living grandchildren, according to a 1975 Harris poll. Most grandparents begin their role during middle age. The average age for becoming a grandmother is 46 and may be as early as 32. This means we need to set aside many outdated ideas about grandparent. They are active people. They do not necessarily get around slowly or hold old-fashioned ideas. Nor are they people with a lot of time on their hands, just waiting around to help with the babysitting. In fact, at least half the grandmothers and almost all the grandfathers of young children

are employed and may well be at the peak of their careers.

Other concerns are likely to be competing for their attention. Grandparents may be going through such midlife crises as career change, bankruptcy, divorce, widowhood, dating, remarriage, health problems or depression. At the same time they are expected to contribute to and help in the care of their grandchildren. They may also be concerned about the care of their older parents -- or even their own grandparents.

The grandparent's role has been described as a "mediated" role -- mediated through their children, the parents of their grandchild. This means parents usually control access to the grandchild. How well the parent and grandparent get along has a great influence on whether the relationship with the grandchild is close or distant. And in case of disagreement over child rearing, the grandparents are expected to yield to the parent's way of doing things.

Grandfathers are one step further removed, since their relationship is also mediated through the grandmother. She may be of much practical help to the mother, teaching her child rearing skills and assisting in household chores. In our society, the grandfather cannot guide a grandchild in the same way primitive grandfathers once taught their grandsons to be hunters or braves. Today's grandfathers who get the most out of their relationship are those who are willing to become somewhat more nurturant than the usual male stereotype. Those who do often find they enjoy it. The freedom to be more caring may be one of the jobs of being a grandfather.

Finding joy in grandparenthood seems to be something that is learned through the years by using the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that make an older person loving and lovable, and interested and interesting. Many older men and women report that they find more satisfaction in their grandchildren and great-grandchildren than they ever did with their own children, when the pressures of parenthood weighed heavily upon them.

Benefits from Grandparenting

Research by Bernice Neugarten and Karol Weinstein (1968) indicated that grandparents received benefits from their grandparenting roles in several ways:

- The grandparents enjoyed having grandchildren and knowing that the family line would be continued. They felt as if they were helping to make an impact on the future of their family.
- For some, grandparenthood offers an opportunity to succeed in a new emotional role -- to be better grandparents than they were parents. Now they can use all of their accumulated years of child rearing experiences to enjoy their grandchildren.
- Since one of the goals of grandparents is to maintain contact with their children and grandchildren, many receive a great deal of satisfaction from their grandchildren's achievements.
- Grandparents gain too as they realize that their families are interested in them and their lives. They can receive support, encouragement, and companionship from their grandchildren and children.

Benefits to Grandchildren

Other research indicates that grandchildren receive some important benefits from grandparenting as well:

- **Attitudes about aging.** Children who have an opportunity to get to know older people develop

positive attitudes toward aging. Ageism (negative views of growing old) flourishes unless children become acquainted with their grandparents or other pleasant older people. If your grandchildren do not live nearby, arrange visits and offer to be a substitute grandparent to youngsters in your community.

- **Learning history and cultural values.** Children learn best from people who have experienced the history they are teaching. This means that grandparents make excellent history teachers. It has been found that children pay better attention to grandparents than they do to television or other media. Plus, information learned from grandparents tends to encourage youngsters to think about values and traditions.
- **Life skills.** Grandparents can teach and encourage life skills -- homemaking, leisure (fishing, bowling), music (piano), handiwork, volunteer work, that may be of life-long benefit.
- **Grandparents and teenage parents.** Studies of teenage parents and their children indicate that the child and mother have better physical and emotional health when they remain in the grandparent's home. In this setting the grandparent serves as the primary caregiver for the child and as an instructor by example for the parent. This is a demanding role for the grandparent, but one that yields positive results for a very difficult parenting situation.

Lack of two-way communication channels may account for the finding that as grandchildren and grandparents grow older, the two generations appear to enjoy each other less. Thus Kahana and Kahana (1970) found white, four- and five-year-olds from middle-class families prefer indulgent grandparents who provide treats like Neugarten and Winstein's formal grandparents. Eight- and nine-year-olds want grandparents to be fun-seekers who play with them. But 11- and 12-year-olds are less interested in doing things with grandparents than in being indulged by them (Kahana and Kahana 1970). For their part, grandparents feel as they grow older that their older grandchildren do not want to bother with them. For this reason, they find younger grandchildren more congenial. In addition, the longer they live, the more grandparents prefer not to have to cope with the noise and high activity levels of children and youths (Clark, 1979).

On Being A "Good" Grandparent

Everyone's idea of what makes a "good" grandparent is slightly different. This ideal is based on personal qualities and family traditions. Consider these suggestions as you develop your own style of grandparenting:

1. **Listen to your grandchildren.** Really listen to what they're thinking, what they're saying and what they're feeling. You'll be surprised at what you can learn. By tuning in to them, you may be able to tune out some of your problems.
2. **Talk with your grandchildren.** Keep some of these tips in mind so your grandchildren will listen when you talk:
 - Get to the point and stick to it without rambling or repeating.
 - Be prepared to talk about lively, interesting subjects.
 - Avoid complaints. Stay away from such subjects as health and minor everyday gripes.
 - Avoid concentrating on I, I, I, me, me, me. And don't monopolize the conversation. By looking into the listener's eyes, you can tell when the other person isn't interested.
 - Be enthusiastic and excited about what you're saying.
3. **Remember that you're a GRAND-parent.** Grandparents do not have the right to take away a mother's and father's right to do their own parenting. Some necessary lessons only come from struggling through on their own.
4. **Discuss discipline with parents and discipline a child only when you are in charge.** Know what the usual practices are and why; what the child is and is not usually allowed to do and why; and what routines are strictly followed and which can slide a little when the situation warrants.

Strive for consistency between what is permitted by parents and grandparents. Consistency is one key to effective discipline.

5. **Express your feelings.** Let your children and grandchildren see that you have feelings. Laugh when you are happy and cry when you're sad. Help them understand sometimes everyone must hurt a little bit. Share experiences that you've had which at the time seemed completely awful and hopeless but turned out well in the end.
6. **Babysit only when you want to.** This task should be done when you feel up to it, when you feel you'd like to, and when you're not overly inconvenienced doing so.
7. **Be aware of the examples you are setting.** Children will learn much more about love from seeing it and feeling it than they will from talking about it. Be neat and attractive. Grandchildren like to be proud of you.
8. **Love your grandchildren for what they are, not for what you think they should be.** Maybe they can't become what they need to be unless someone loves them as they are right now.

When Grandchildren Come To Visit

When grandchildren stay in your home, you have opportunities for leisurely talks and sharing of routine experiences. However, grandchildren living in your home can be exhausting unless you take some precautions.

- **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 for only a few minor adjustments in yours and your grandchild's schedule. Children feel secure in a routine if they know why you think it is important.
- **Establish and enforce clear limits.** While you have an opportunity to develop a unique relationship with grandchildren, you do not want to get into conflict with their parents or have discipline problems in your home. Children want and need grandparents to say no. This sets limits which help children feel more secure.
- **Provide some private space.** We all need a place to call our own. So, provide your grandchildren with some space to keep toys, favorite blanket, pillow and stuffed animals. Then explain which areas are yours. If you respect their privacy and property, they will probably respect yours.
- **Provide space to be near you.** Grandchildren want to be part of the action, so provide a place where they can be near, but not in the way. A table and chair in the kitchen allows the children to draw or look at books 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 grandchild. Also find out what your grandchild likes and is accustomed to having at home. Be sure to have a few of these favorites on hand, too.
- **Plan simple activities.** Children enjoy simple things that become special because they are shared with grandparents. A trip to the library, a picnic in a nearby park, going to the movies, playing miniature golf together or looking at a photo album are all fun, inexpensive and easily managed.

Having Fun With Grandchildren

Research studies indicate that most grandparents pursue their roles out of a strong desire to have fun. So, here's a chance to be yourself and enjoy this "grand" relationship.

- **Holidays.** Make holidays a special time by: (1) making a holiday scrapbook with recipes, traditions and stories; (2) giving each grandchild a special ornament; (3) sharing holiday books, stories, music; (4) going to special movies, watching special TV programs together; (5) giving grandchildren special responsibilities (delivering gifts, serving treats) during holidays.

- **Hobbies.** Make a family tree with pictures and a written history.
- **Outings.** Go on a picnic to the park, to church, to a concert, to the zoo, to the library, to sporting events, or just go for a nice walk.
- **Gifts.** Use your imagination. Those gifts you make or choose will give more pleasure than expensive or showy items. Give a personal possession that a grandchild admires.
- **Grandletters.** Everyone enjoys receiving mail; send letters describing what life was like when you were the same age as your grandchild. Describe feelings, fears, hopes, dreams, what you did to entertain yourself, what life was like in your family, from the perspective of a child.
- **Long Distance Grandparenting.** Try some of these techniques to maintain an emotionally close relationship even if you're miles apart:
 - phone calls
 - letters and cards
 - exchange books you have enjoyed
 - record cassette tapes as "letters"
 - exchange photographs and drawings
 - write poetry for each other
 - send homemade gifts
 - ask to see some school papers
 - give hand-me-down presents
 - mail newspaper clippings

Whether your contribution is large or small to grandchildren, what you do is important. When a close, intimate grandparent/grandchild relationship has been formed, an attachment is often developed for life. With that attachment comes the experience of being loved and accepted; a sense of security and warmth; a historical sense of self; and the gift of a role model for the future. How good a "GRAND" parent are you?

This NebGuide adapted from materials developed by Dr. Elaine Wilson, Parenting Specialist, Oklahoma State University, and from materials by Diane Franzen, Extension Agent, University of Nebraska, and Nancy Long, Extension Agent, University of Nebraska.

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