

More Than Cookies and Milk

Being a grandparent or step-grandparent is one of the special joys of growing older. As one grandmother said, "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!

Grandparents may 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 and working parents all make a difference in grandparenting in the '90s. Children continue to need the stability, the time and the caring of grandparents.

Grandma/Grandpa 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 and stepgrandparents can offer children in these busy families time with adults who can give the children companionship and a listening ear.



NDSU
Extension Service

North Dakota State University, Fargo, North Dakota 58105

Reviewed and reprinted May 2006

APRIL 1994

Who's the boss?

From the vantage point of your experience, it's easy to see ways that your son or daughter, son-in-law or daughter-in-law 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 parent 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 deal with the children as you would like, speak up but do so privately and with respect. Don't allow the children to get caught in the middle.

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 may not have time and patience to deal effectively with their children. Grandparents can be a special source of support and nurturance, 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 children's view of their parents. Most important, grandparents can express their love and concern to give the children the extra attention they may need.

Across the miles

Many of today's grandparents and stepgrandparents must deal with their grandchildren living at a great distance rather than down the road or across town. Different methods of communication 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 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 video cameras and share recordings of the grandchildren in both pictures and sound. Sometimes grandparents and stepgrandparents create unique ways to send special messages to grandchildren such as always using a red envelope for letters, taping a bedtime story, starting new traditions and teaching family craft skills to older children. One grandmother even got an 800 number to encourage her grandchildren to call anytime. Whatever ways you use to keep in touch, the connection between the generations helps both the young and the old.

Eight Best Gifts For Grandchildren

1 Spend time one-on-one with grandchildren. The time 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 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 Listen 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. This kind of communication helps build a loving relationship between you and your grandchild. 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 a letter or card in its own envelope inside a larger mailing envelope. For very young children 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 infants it may mean rocking or playing on the floor. Reading stories not only allows relating to children, but also helps build skills and knowledge. When children are able to read, let them 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 everyday things. Let the children watch or join in as you bake, garden or work in the shop.

5 Share your history and family traditions. Children gain security and stability knowing that they belong to a larger family with 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 children see the personal side of those who have gone before. Talk about family traditions, and let children 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 themselves.

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 a 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 Give the best gift of all—love. When you take time to be with grandchildren, 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/Stepgrandma or Grandpa/Stepgrandpa can be a special treasure that will always be remembered.

Laura DeHaan, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of Child Development, NDSU

Reviewed and revised by

Sean Brotherson, Ph.D.

Family Science Specialist, NDSU Extension Service

Adapted from Iowa State Extension Service Publication,
Virginia Molgaard, 1990.

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5M-4-94, 2M-4-96, 300-6-06