

## More Grandparents, New Roles

The number of grandparents is increasing as grandparents live longer and family systems change. Some children no longer have just one set of grandparents from their mother and one set from their father. Children might have several sets of grandparents from multiple marriages of their parents and from remarriages of their original grandparents.

The role of grandparents has changed dramatically. Grandparents have always been concerned about developing a meaningful relationship with their grandchildren, but now they may also be involved in a variety of other roles in their grandchildren's lives. They may be seeking visitation rights or custody of their children's children after a divorce. Grandparents are the largest-growing group seeking to become foster parents or adopt their biological grandchildren. Some of these grandparents have taken on the role of raising their own grandchildren permanently.

## Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

Some grandparents are now raising their grandchildren instead of the child's parents for a variety of reasons: teen pregnancy, substance abuse, death, divorce, joblessness, imprisonment, neglect, child abuse, abandonment, or AIDS. For some of these families, one or both parents are present. But for others, the grandparent is the only adult present. In some cases, children are placed with the grandparent instead of foster care and the grandparent takes on all the responsibility for raising the grandchildren or great-grandchildren. For some of these grandparents, this arrangement becomes a permanent rather than temporary situation.



Grandparents have lots of questions and concerns when they take on the job of raising their grandchildren. The AARP Grandparent Information Center reports the following as the most frequently asked questions by grandparents raising their grandchildren:

1. Is there a grandparent support group near me?
2. Can I legally make decisions about my grandchild?
3. Can I get financial assistance, such as medical care and insurance, to raise this grandchild?
4. How do I relate to the grandchild's parents (my own children)?

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The Grandparent Information Center offers useful resources on grandparents raising grandchildren. These are available from AARP, 601 E. Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20049; toll free phone 888-687-2277; or [www.aarp.org](http://www.aarp.org)

### **Relationships**

With greater mobility, grandparents can spend more time with their children and grandchildren, and be a part of their daily lives. Technology allows them to make contact easily by phone, computer, or fax. Commercial air, bus, and train travel allow for more frequent visits. Some grandparents choose to move closer to their family. Nearly half of all grandparents report weekly contact with one or more grandchildren, and three-quarters report monthly contact. Grandparents want to be a significant part of their family's lives and often have the time, means, and desire to care for grandchildren when parents work, vacation, or experience a crisis.

Besides spending time with grandchildren, there are specific things that grandparents can do to maintain a close relationship with their grandchildren:

1. Pay attention to the names of your grandchild's friends. Ask about them often in conversations. If you live close by, invite them to lunch and dinner every now and then.
2. Give your grandchildren pictures of their parents when they were as close to the grandchildren's age as possible. Repeat every few years.
3. Make arrangements with the parent to make telephone calls to your grandchild. Call solely to speak to your grandchild. Hang up immediately after the conversation no matter how short it is. Call at a different time to speak to his or her parents.
4. Send your grandchild a poster of his or her favorite musical group, movie star, or sports star. (An autographed picture is even better!)
5. Request a private performance of your grandchild's public appearance before or after a show or concert, or ask for a video of the performance.
6. Be understanding that there will be times when grandchildren will prefer their parents over their grandparents.
7. Subscribe your grandchild to a child's magazine, and spend time enjoying it together during visits.
8. Make a special place in your home for your grandchild's art work or pictures.
9. Remember holidays and birthdays with cards specially addressed to your grandchildren. Children love to get mail. Correspond with them via e-mail or text, if possible.
10. Plant a tree upon the birth of each grandchild; then take a picture of it each year to mark your grandchild's birthday.

### **30 Easy and Quick Activities To Do with Grandchildren**

When grandchildren visit your home, it's important to spend time with them. These activities require little preparation and use things you already have around the house.

1. Devise a secret handshake with your grandchild.
2. Trace the route between your grandchild's home and yours on a map.
3. Get a dozen small objects, such as buttons or sugar packets. Tell the child to turn around, then put them one at a time in the child's hand and ask them to identify the object without looking.
4. Send the child on a treasure hunt to find the biggest object (vase, lamp, chair) and smallest object (pencil, candle, pillow) in a room.
5. Let the child photograph you making funny faces or dressing up in funny costumes.
6. Trace your feet and hands on paper.
7. Glue a mosaic of different beans, rice, and noodles on a large poster board.

8. Play your favorite music for your grandchild, then let your grandchild play her favorite music. This works for young children as well as teens.
9. Take a tour of the local post office. Let your grandchild mail a letter to himself.
10. Visit the local library and get a borrowing card for your grandchild so she can borrow books when visiting. As your grandchild grows, her book selection will also grow.
11. Throw an un-birthday party. Let your grandchild plan the menu and blow up balloons if old enough. Invite other children or stuffed animals.
12. Serve 4:00 afternoon tea with tiny sandwiches, little cookies, and your special teapot. Look at a book about England or afternoon teas.
13. Dip the flat cut-off ends of vegetables (potatoes, carrots, peppers) into nontoxic paints and stamp designs on paper. Display pictures on the refrigerator.
14. Cut fish shapes out of construction paper and add paper clips for mouths. Attach a string and magnet to a stick—then go fish.
15. Teach your grandchild how to formally set the table with silverware, china, and glassware.
16. Make a grandchild puzzle by gluing an 8 x 10 photo to a piece of cardboard, then draw squiggly shapes and cut along the lines.
17. Plant a special grandchild garden with seeds and plants you both pick out. Both of you can weed, water, and harvest.
18. Set up a rainy day picnic on your living room floor.
19. Go to a movie or rent a movie you want to see, then have your grandchild pick a movie he wants to see. Watch each other's favorite TV show.
20. Read parts of books out loud to one another.
21. Set aside old clothes in a box for dress up and pretend play.
22. Bake cookies, cupcakes, or snacks together. Make cut-out sandwiches and decorate them with pickles, raisins, and carrot sticks.
23. Go to the park and swing.
24. Play board games or card games.
25. Visit the zoo, aquarium, or children's museum.
26. Blow bubbles.
27. Camp out in the back yard.
28. Write a letter about your grandchild every year. Help her make a yearly time capsule with photos, mementos, and artwork. Keep it in a safe place until the child turns 18.
29. Make decorations for holidays such as dyed eggs, pine cone turkeys, or Christmas ornaments.
30. Play catch with older children, or roll a large ball back and forth with younger children.

### **Explaining Grandparents' Illnesses to Children**

Dealing emotionally with an ill family member is an ongoing process. Adults can open the doors of communication to children, recognizing that another generation is affected and waiting to be brought into the family system to share. When children see grandparents suffering from Alzheimer's disease, dementia, cancer, or other serious illnesses, children may say hurtful things such as, "I'm not going to see him anymore ... he doesn't even know me." Just like other family members, they are struggling to make sense of their grandparents' illness. Children have either never known the joy of a warm, loving grandparent or have memories of happy experiences that will never be repeated. They, too, are undergoing their own process of coming to terms with what all this means for them. Children may feel frightened, neglected,

and in need of attention, or they may simply need more information.

Realize that children's harsh words may sometimes mask the real thoughts or questions:

- Will you get sick like Grandma?
- Who will take care of me if this happens to you?
- Can I catch this?
- I'm afraid Grandpa will hurt me.
- All my friends spend the holidays with their grandparents ... why can't I?
- I miss Grandpa.

To answer these questions or concerns, give the child:

- Regular time together, when the child can share feelings and ask questions.
- A schedule of the activities with the grandparent.
- A reason why you spend more time with the grandparent.
- An understanding of your own feelings about the illness.
- Facts about the disease that are age-appropriate and understandable.

There are many children's books available that deal with the issue of grandparents who have a serious illness. Reading these books to children can often help both adults and children cope with the illness.

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## **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION/ INFORMACION ADICIONAL**

Family Development publications produced by New Mexico State University's Cooperative Extension Service are all located at [http://aces.nmsu.edu/pubs/\\_f/](http://aces.nmsu.edu/pubs/_f/)

- Guide F-107:** Helping Young Children Cope with Anger/  
Ayudándole a los niños pequeños a contolar el enojo
- Guide F-108:** Guiding Young Children/Guiando a los niños pequeños
- Guide F-109:** Toilet Training for Toddlers/Su bebé aprende a usar el baño
- Guide F-110:** Helping Children Go to Bed/Cuando los niños no quieren irse a la cama
- Guide F-112:** Temper Tantrums/Ataques de mal genio
- Guide F-115:** Showing Love to Your Child/Demuestre el cariño a su niño
- Guide F-116:** Listening is Important/Eschucha a su hijo
- Guide F-120:** Creating Strong Families
- Guide F-122:** Understanding Teens
- Guide F-213:** When the New Baby Arrives/Cuando llegue el nuevo bebé



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