



No. 7 in the Series

THE ART OF GRANDPARENTING

For grandparents, being present in the lives of their grandchildren is a top priority and a role that brings great joy. However, children and grandchildren may live too far away to see them every day or even every year.

When grandparenting at a distance, grandparents may be concerned about missing out on their grandchildren's important milestones, being absent for holidays or afraid of losing touch with grandchildren as they grow older. Thankfully, with some forethought and the help of modern communication technologies, grandparents have many ways to be present in their grandchildren's daily lives.

Grandparenting at a Distance

Philip Estepp, M.S., Extension Associate, NDSU Extension
Sean Brotherson, Ph.D., Family Science Specialist, NDSU Extension
Divya Saxena, M.S., Extension Associate, NDSU Extension
Jane Strommen, Ph.D., Gerontology Specialist, NDSU Extension

Long-distance Grandparenting

Long-distance grandparenting is becoming more common in today's era. Grandparents may relocate for retirement. Adult children and grandchildren may move for work or education. A senior's transition to a residential care facility also may require grandparenting at a distance.

Living at a distance can leave grandparents feeling that they are "missing out" on a grandchild's life or meaningful shared experiences. However, living at a distance doesn't mean you can't be close emotionally.

Maintaining close relationships with grandchildren is a concern among grandparents. **Distance between where family members live** has been shown by research to be the strongest predictor of grandparent-grandchild contact. Grandparents who do not see their grandchildren as much as they would like cite distance as one of the primary reasons.

"Everyone needs to have access both to grandparents and grandchildren in order to be a full human being." – Margaret Mead

NDSU

EXTENSION

North Dakota State University, Fargo, North Dakota
 September 2020

Living at a distance affects things such as frequency of in-person contact or exchanges of support and assistance between grandparents and grandchildren. As a result, considering how to manage the challenges that come with grandparenting at a distance is important.

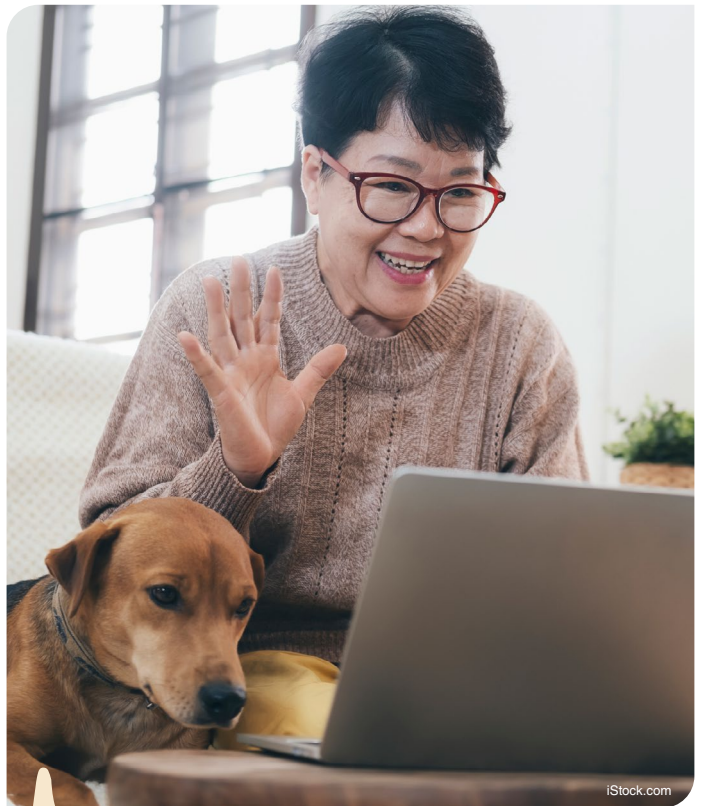
Grandparenting at a distance looks different for every grandparent. For some individuals, long distance is living in a rural town while your grandchildren live in the big city. For others, long distance is living in a different country while your grandchildren attend school or their parents work abroad.

In some situations, a grandparent may have limited funds to travel and be with grandchildren, even if the distance is not too great. Visiting as often as grandparents like may be too expensive or health may not permit them to travel, while at other times, the children and grandchildren lead busy lives, which makes finding a good time to visit difficult to do.

While visits with grandchildren may not be as frequent as grandparents like, the times they are able to spend together can be all the more precious and meaningful. Long-distance grandparents may enjoy longer stays when they are making a visit and more time dedicated to catching up with children and grandchildren. In some cases, older grandchildren may be able to spend holidays or extended vacation time with their grandparents.

These are real concerns and the answers may look different for every family, depending on their circumstances. Explore some of the issues in grandparenting at a distance in the “Grandparenting at a Distance Exercise” box.

“Because grandparents are usually free to love and guide and befriend the young without having to take daily responsibility for them, they can often reach out past pride and fear of failure and close the space between generations.” – Jimmy Carter



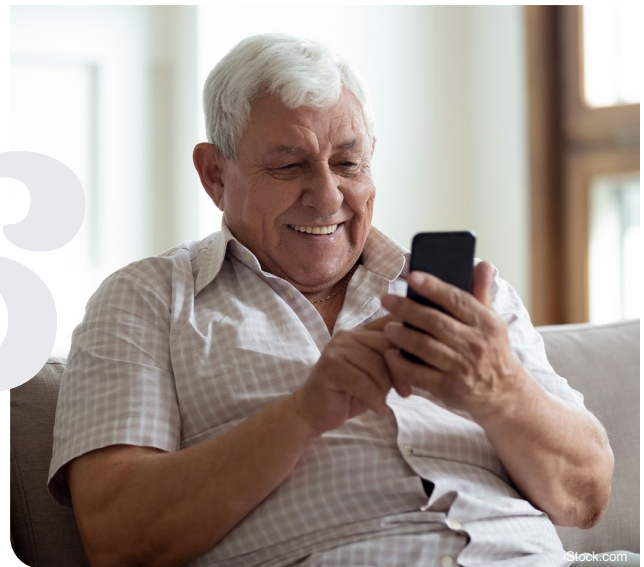
About 10% of grandparents have to travel more than 200 miles to see their closest grandchild, while 40% report having to travel more than 200 miles to see their furthest grandchild. (AARP Report, 2012)



Grandparenting at a Distance Exercise

The time between in-person visits with a grandchild can be challenging. Assess your own feelings by placing a check mark next to any statement you have experienced. Then begin talking to your adult child(ren), peers, or others to gain ideas on how to manage these thoughts or feelings.

- How do I stay close to my grandchild(ren) when we see each other in person infrequently?
- Does living at a distance mean I will have only a minor role in my grandchild's life?
- How can I overcome the challenges of distance that separate me from time with my grandchild(ren)?
- Will I be a stranger to my grandchild(ren) because of distance and less frequent contact?
- How can I be there to support my grandchild(ren) as they grow older?
- Can I find ways to encourage my grandchild(ren) to be in contact with me more frequently?
- Can my adult child(ren) help facilitate more interaction and closeness with my grandchild(ren)?



More than 70% of baby boomers owned a smartphone in 2019, compared with 25% in 2011. Seven in 10 adults 50 and older also regularly use social media. (Pew, 2019)

Technology and Keeping in Touch

Frequent and regular communication is key to staying in touch when grandparenting at a distance. Modern technology makes this much easier. Recent advances in technology and the devices we use to communicate are more accessible, affordable and intuitive to use than ever before.

While grandchildren might be ahead of their grandparents in their technology usage and skills, grandparents are quickly catching up. Older adults commonly use smartphones or tablets to stay in touch with their grandchildren.

Modern technology can help grandparents be part of a grandchild's life on a regular basis. Check any of the communication tools that you use to regularly keep in touch with a grandchild (see assessment tool "How Do I Connect With My Grandchild?").

Technology Connections You Use

Place a check mark next to any technology tool you use to connect with grandkids. Then note how often you use it to connect. Ask a peer, adult child or grandchild for help learning to use any tools that you have not yet used.

How Do I Connect With My Grandchild?

| Technology Tool | ✓ | Daily | 2-3 Times a Week | Weekly | Monthly | 1-2 Times a Year |
|----------------------|---|-------|------------------|--------|---------|------------------|
| Texting on the phone | | | | | | |
| Phone calls | | | | | | |
| Cards or letters | | | | | | |
| Email | | | | | | |
| Video chat | | | | | | |
| Instant messaging | | | | | | |
| Other: | | | | | | |

A variety of useful technology tools allow grandparents to connect with grandchildren. Consider the following points:

- ▶ Texting on the phone can allow easy exchanges of small messages or sharing pictures and video clips.
- ▶ Phone calls offer an “old fashioned” but effective means to catch up and connect and hear someone’s voice. Perhaps schedule a weekly phone call to catch up and share.
- ▶ Grandchildren may find handwritten cards, letters or small care packages to be especially meaningful.
- ▶ Email is a reliable communication method while messaging applications allow you to write and reply to your grandchildren instantly.
- ▶ Video chats allow you and your grandchildren to see each other while talking and do not require typing or reading small print.
- ▶ Video chat and messenger applications are typically free to use and readily accessible via computers, tablets or smartphones.

While a number of technologies are available to stay in touch on a daily basis, such as those mentioned above, you need to find the technology tools that fit your needs and allow you to keep in touch with grandchildren in a meaningful way.



Nine Ways to Bond From a Distance

Explore these additional ways to bond with grandchildren at a distance:

1 Share a Book Together

- ▶ Choose a book to read together while apart and discuss it through phone calls.
- ▶ Set a weekly reading time and read a book together via video chat.

2 Play a Game

- ▶ Play a board game such as checkers or a card game via video chat.
- ▶ Do a game together that can be done on the internet, such as “Jeopardy” or “Wheel of Fortune” (use sites such as sony.com).

3 Start a Regular Correspondence

- ▶ Maintain a handwritten correspondence with your grandchildren and keep the letters. Bind the letters in a book to pass on as a keepsake.

4 Exchange Pictures Weekly

- ▶ Take and share two to four pictures a week that highlight your activities and share with each other once a week.

5 Share Gratitude Messages

- ▶ Message your grandchildren one positive thing that happened to you today or something for which you are grateful. Also, encourage them to share something they are grateful for that day as well. Do this every day or once a week.

6 Exchange Favorite Recipes

- ▶ Write down and share one favorite recipe each month. Each of you make the recipe and then discuss how it turned out, what you did or did not like, and why it’s a favorite recipe. Even do this via video chat if you can make the time!

7 Play 20 Questions Via Email

- ▶ Come up with 20 questions to share and respond to via email, such as: “Tell me about your best friend ever” or “What has been your most embarrassing experience?”

8 Research a Relative

- ▶ Start a joint family history project. Ask your grandchildren which relatives they would like to learn more about or introduce one to them. Spend time researching stories and information and share what you have learned with each other.

9 Random Acts of Kindness Day

- ▶ Pick a day where you both will perform random acts of kindness. For example: Do the dishes for mom, rake leaves off the neighbor’s lawn, pay for someone’s lunch, etc. Call each other at the end of the day to share how the day went.





Tips for Maintaining Connections at a Distance

While grandparenting from a distance can be a challenge, it does not have to keep you from a close relationship with grandchildren. Remember these tips as you seek to maintain connections at a distance:

- ▶ While keeping in touch with grandchildren, work with their parents to ensure that they set aside enough time in their busy schedules to allow for phone or video calls. Maintaining a healthy relationship with adult children and communicating with them your desire to be present in your grandchildren's lives is critical when grandparenting at a distance.
- ▶ You are never too old to learn new skills. Take time to learn or get assistance in using tools that help you stay connected.
- ▶ The relationship with a grandchild goes both ways. Encourage your grandchildren to contact you and be welcoming of their efforts to learn about your life or engage with you.
- ▶ Maintain consistency in your communication. Being consistent lets grandchildren know you are committed to being part of their lives. Be sure to let them know what happened if you were unable to follow through on a planned connection.
- ▶ Convene a conversation with adult children and grandchildren. Identify any issues or challenges due to distance, and plan how you might communicate regularly or get together physically.

Remember to be compassionate with yourself as you strive to bond with your grandchildren across long distances. Grandchildren may not appreciate every letter or text sent, but consistent and regular efforts to stay in touch will allow you to express your love while being a stable and meaningful fixture in their daily lives.

Recommended Resources

Books

Guarendi, R. (2018). *Being a grandparent: Just like being a parent . . . only different!* Cincinnati, Ohio: Franciscan Media.

Hillhouse, A. (2017). *Virtual grandma*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing.

Johnson, S., Carlson, J., and Bower, E. (2010). *Grandloving: Making memories with your grandchildren*. Lancaster, Va.: Heartstrings Press. Also, visit www.grandloving.com.

Wasserman, S. (2010). *Grandparenting at long distance: Connecting with grandchildren across the miles*. Brush Education.

Organizations and Websites

Grandkids Matter – Supported by the National Association for Grandparenting, Grandkids Matter is an online resource center offering tips, videos, articles and other resources on grandparenting topics. Website: <https://grandkidsmatter.org/>

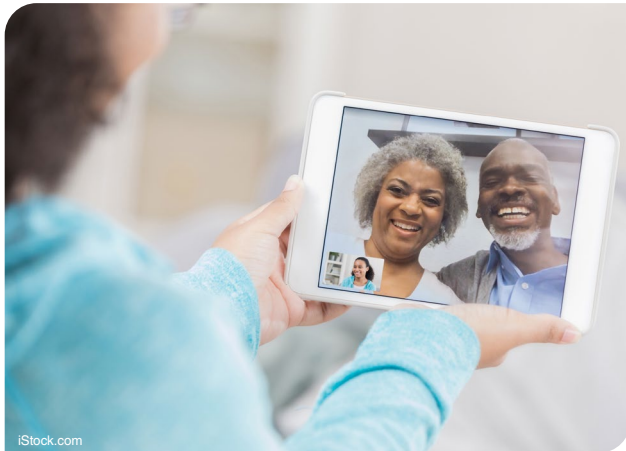
Cyberparent – This website offers articles, links and groups that are dedicated to supporting a loving relationship between grandparents and their grandchildren. Website: www.cyberparent.com/gran/

The Long Distance Grandparent – An online organization that supports grandparents at a distance from grandchildren with ideas, resources and weekly email tips to connect with grandchildren. Website: <https://thelongdistancegrandparent.com/>

References

- AARP Report. (2012). *Insights and spending habits of modern grandparents*. Washington, D.C.: AARP Research and Strategic Analysis. Retrieved from: www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/research/surveys_statistics/general/2012/Insights-and-Spending-Habits-of-Modern-Grandparents-AARP.pdf
- AARP Research. (2017). *Technology use and attitudes among mid-life and older Americans*. Washington, D.C.: AARP Research. Retrieved from: www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/research/surveys_statistics/technology/info-2018/atom-nov-2017-tech-module
- Bangerter, L.R., and Waldron, V.R. (2014). Turning points in long distance grandparent-grandchild relationships. *Journal of Aging Studies, 29*, 88-97.
- Harrington Meyer, M., and Kandic, A. (2017). Grandparenting in the United States. *Innovation in Aging, 1*(2), 1-10. doi:10.1093/geron/igx023
- Hayslip, B., Maiden, R.J., and Dolbin-MacNab, M.L. (2015). Relationships between grandparents and their grandchildren: An applied dyadic perspective. In Kirkcaldy, B. (Ed.), *Promoting Psychological Well-Being in Children and Families* (pp. 279-295). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pew Research Center. (2019). Millennials stand out for their technology use, but older generations also embrace digital life. Retrieved from www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/09/09/us-generations-technology-use/
- Wasserman, S. (2010). *Grandparenting at long distance: Connecting with grandchildren across the miles*. Brush Education.





For more in The Art of Grandparenting series, please visit www.ag.ndsu.edu/familyscience

The NDSU Extension Service does not endorse commercial products or companies even though reference may be made to tradenames, trademarks or service names.

NDSU encourages you to use and share this content, but please do so under the conditions of our Creative Commons license. You may copy, distribute, transmit and adapt this work as long as you give full attribution, don't use the work for commercial purposes and share your resulting work similarly. For more information, visit www.ag.ndsu.edu/agcomm/creative-commons.

For more information on this and other topics, see www.ag.ndsu.edu

County commissions, North Dakota State University and U.S. Department of Agriculture cooperating. NDSU does not discriminate in its programs and activities on the basis of age, color, gender expression/identity, genetic information, marital status, national origin, participation in lawful off-campus activity, physical or mental disability, pregnancy, public assistance status, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, spousal relationship to current employee, or veteran status, as applicable. Direct inquiries to Vice Provost for Title IX/ADA Coordinator, Old Main 201, NDSU Main Campus, 701-231-7708, ndsu.eoaa@ndsu.edu. This publication will be made available in alternative formats for people with disabilities upon request, 701-231-7881. 600-9-20