



No. 1 in the Series

## THE ART OF GRANDPARENTING

**A**mong the variety of family roles that an individual might pass through in life, perhaps the most unique is becoming a grandmother, a grandfather or a stepgrandparent.

Grandparenting typically occurs when a person has reached maturity and has wisdom or experience to share with the rising generation. This publication introduces an educational series on the art of grandparenting and the unique contributions that grandparents can make to family life and the lives of grandchildren.

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# The Art of Grandparenting

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## Becoming a Grandparent

In family life, the transition to parenthood often is seen as a significant shift that introduces the new parent to the joys and challenges of caring for a new family member. Less attention is given to the transition that occurs for adults when they become a grandparent, and yet, similarly, it is an occurrence that offers the opportunity for both happiness and growth.

Becoming a grandparent puts adults in the role of mentors to a new generation. Lifespan psychologist Erik Erikson developed the term **generativity** to describe the task of grandparents and other adults in raising and contributing to the well-being of the next generation of children. Grandparenting puts adults in the role of guiding, giving and engaging young people to see the future and what they have the potential to become, and to reach for it.

Not all grandparents are the same. Not all people enter grandparenthood in the same manner. Research indicates that nearly 95% of all older adults with children become grandparents. Additionally, others enter the “grandparent” role as adult children marry spouses who already have children (becoming a stepgrandparent), or they simply adopt the role of grandparent to children in their family or community circle. In any family circumstance, becoming a grandparent is a doorway to a new opportunity for connection, mentoring and passing on values and family identity.

“If I had known grandchildren were going to be so much fun, I would have had them first.”

## The Roles of Grandparents

Acting in the role of grandparent can be one of the special joys of growing older. Grandparents have multiple and important roles that they play in family life: watchdog, storyteller, family historian, listening ear, etc. Grandparents may fulfill all of these roles and more. Remember that grandparents can provide a link to the past and a guide to the future. In many ways, grandparents act as the bridge between generations in a family and within communities.

“Becoming a grandparent is like the dessert at the end of a good meal.”

The role that a grandparent plays in family life can vary widely. Factors that influence a grandparent's role may include a grandparent's age, the life stage of the grandchild, gender, race or culture, physical health of the grandparent, closeness of

family ties and the manner in which parents interact with a child's grandparents. A grandparent does not have to act in only one role or remain the same in his or her grandparenting style. A few main styles of grandparenting described in research are the following:

- ▮ **Formal grandparent** – a grandparent who follows prescribed ideas and acts as the family elder
- ▮ **Fun-seeker grandparent** – a grandparent who is informal, playful and fun for a grandchild
- ▮ **Reserved grandparent** – a grandparent who remains in the background and engages family usually around holidays or other ritual occasions (weddings, etc.)
- ▮ **Surrogate parent** – a grandparent who assumes the caregiving responsibilities in raising a grandchild
- ▮ **Wise grandparent** – a grandparent who provides training in special skills, furnishes resources or dispenses wisdom and counsel

The point is that a grandparent does not need to practice a particular style. A grandparent's involvement and role in a grandchild's life may vary and combine a variety of experiences and styles that fit their relationship with a particular child and also their personality.

## The Meaning of Grandparenting

When a grandparent makes a phone call to a grandchild, attends a concert with a grandchild or just takes a grandchild someplace, they are having a direct influence on a grandchild. When grandchildren are confronted with a situation and think about their grandparent, they are influenced indirectly by that grandparent's emotional presence and example.

### What kind of relationships and legacy do you wish to build as you practice the art of grandparenting?

Thinking about and reflecting on your own experiences and ideas can be helpful in preparing you to be a grandparent or in your current grandparenting activities. Consider and reflect on the following questions:

- ▮ Were you close to a grandparent or grandparental figure?
- ▮ Were or are your own parents close to your children?
- ▮ How did you feel (or how might you feel) when your first grandchild was born?
- ▮ Can you see yourself as the emotional leader of your family?
- ▮ What are some things that you uniquely can teach a grandchild?
- ▮ What are some of the things you'd like to pass on to a grandchild?

We can choose the actions we take in seeking to establish positive relationships and build lasting memories in the lives of grandchildren.

The meaning of grandparenting can be deep and profound for many people. The benefits that come to grandchildren as grandparents take an active role in their lives include a variety of positive contributions. Grandparents can do the following:

- ▮ Impart a sense of identity
- ▮ Provide unconditional love
- ▮ Represent hope for the future
- ▮ Be a source of stability and security
- ▮ Act as a mentor and teacher
- ▮ Exemplify positive values, ideals and beliefs
- ▮ Nurture and give support
- ▮ Assist with emotional, mental and spiritual well-being
- ▮ Be a role model and play companion

## Exploring the Role of Grandparents

To stimulate your thinking and assist you in exploring the role of grandparents, take some time to fill in the blank to each statement and provide your answers or discuss possible ideas with other family members or friends.

1. "Grandparents are (fun)."  
▶ "Grandparents are \_\_\_\_\_."  
▶ "Grandparents are \_\_\_\_\_."
2. "Grandparents give (time)."  
▶ "Grandparents give \_\_\_\_\_."  
▶ "Grandparents give \_\_\_\_\_."
3. "Grandparents don't (disagree with parents in front of children)."  
▶ "Grandparents don't \_\_\_\_\_."  
▶ "Grandparents don't \_\_\_\_\_."
4. "Grandparents do this: (give a listening ear)."  
▶ "Grandparents do this: \_\_\_\_\_."  
▶ "Grandparents do this: \_\_\_\_\_."
5. "An important role for grandparents is (family storyteller)."  
▶ "An important role for grandparents is \_\_\_\_\_."  
▶ "An important role for grandparents is \_\_\_\_\_."

## Conclusion

Becoming a grandparent introduces adults to a life experience that can be full of meaning and bring joy as one learns the art of grandparenting. The famous psychologist, Erik Erikson, observed that the most important task of adulthood is the process of generativity, or giving of oneself to the next generation. What are you giving? What would you like to give to the grandchildren in your life? Take time to appreciate the relationships available to you and consider what you will contribute as a grandparent in raising the next generation.

## Nine Things to Remember When Grandchildren Come to Visit

1. The voice of one 3-year-old crying is louder than those of 20 adults laughing.
2. A 6-year-old can start a fire with a flint rock.
3. VCR/DVD players do not eject peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.
4. Always look in the oven before you turn it on. Plastic toys and cats do not like ovens.
5. Play dough is not microwaveable.
6. When you hear the toilet flush and then the words, "Uh-oh," it already is too late.
7. Car keys are perfect for dropping down any vent.
8. Marbles in gas tanks make a lot of noise when driving.
9. Cats get dizzy when dropped down stairs while in a bag.

"If your baby never fusses, always sleeps through the night and is an absolutely perfect baby, you are not the parent, you are the grandparent."

# Recommended Resources

## Books

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

Isay, J. (2018). *Unconditional love: A guide to navigating the joys and challenges of being a grandparent today*. Harper.

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

Kornhaber, A. (2017). *The grandparent guide: The definitive guide to coping with the challenges of modern grandparenting*. Independently published.

LaBan, E. (2009). *The grandparents handbook: Games, activities, tips, how-tos, and all-around fun*. Philadelphia: Quirk Books.

## Organizations and Websites

**Home and Family resource page, American Association of Retired Persons** – The Home and Family resource page on the AARP website offers ideas, articles and discussion groups for a variety of family and grandparenting issues.

Website: [www.aarp.org/home-family/friends-family/](http://www.aarp.org/home-family/friends-family/)

**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](http://www.cyberparent.com/gran)

**Grandloving.com** – The Grandloving.com website offers a variety of useful tips, connection ideas and resources for grandparents and their family members. Website: [www.grandloving.com/index.html](http://www.grandloving.com/index.html)

**Parents.com** – This site has a wealth of resources for grandparents and other family members, including articles, tips and tools. Website: [www.parents.com](http://www.parents.com)

**Zero to Three: The Grand Connector** – Zero to Three is a nationally respected organization that provides useful articles, videos, curricula and other resources on grandparenting topics.

Website: [www.zerotothree.org/resources/for-families/grandparents/](http://www.zerotothree.org/resources/for-families/grandparents/)

## References

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Ferraro, K., and Carr, D. (Eds.). (2021). *Handbook of aging and the social sciences* (9th ed.). Academic Press.

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

Kornhaber, A. (2017). *The grandparent guide: The definitive guide to coping with the challenges of modern grandparenting*. Independently published.

Meyer, M.H., Kandic, A., and Sutor, J.J. (2017). *Grandparenting in the United States. Innovation in Aging*, 1(2).

Meyer, M.H., and Abdul-Malak, Y. (Eds.). (2017). *Grandparenting in the United States (Society and Aging Series)*. New York: Routledge.

For more in The Art of Grandparenting series, please visit [www.ndsu.edu/agriculture/extension/extension-topics/family](http://www.ndsu.edu/agriculture/extension/extension-topics/family)

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