

# The Changing Face of GRANDPARENTING



Older people have the right to **INDEPENDENCE, PARTICIPATION, CARE, SELF-FULFILMENT and DIGNITY** – *United Nations Principles for Older Persons*

## WHAT IS A GRANDPARENT?

*“My grandchildren have enriched my life, given me a sense of purpose and a desire to remain healthy for as long as I can”*

*Graham, Aged 73*

The relationship between a grandparent and grandchild can be mutually fulfilling and rewarding for both the older person and the younger child. Grandparenting is not necessarily confined to the natural grandparents: a family friend or a neighbour sometimes fulfils this important role.

A Grandparent plays a very important role in the family today, for example as:

- advisor
- teacher
- caregiver
- friend
- spiritual mentor
- safe haven
- story-teller
- family historian

Successful relationships between grandparents and grandchildren are based on love, mutual respect and honesty. Relationships are two-way and affection cannot be bought. Respect too, must be earned; it is not given as a right.

Grandparenting can offer a second chance to participate in parenting and enjoying children. There are usually fewer pressures and demands on grandparents which means they are able to be more relaxed and tolerant and can complement the role of parents.

Grandchildren can also learn new and different ways of seeing the world from their grandparents.

## Suggestions for Grandparents

- Value your own wisdom and experience as parents
- Respect and support your children's parenting views
- Offer to look after your grandchildren to give their parents a break
- Discuss your availability for childminding and discuss your wishes about frequency of holiday visits
- Most important of all - have fun with your grandchildren!





## INTER-GENERATIONAL BONDS

*“The nice thing about Nana and Grandad is that they say that we have two homes - one with our parents and one with them”*

*Thomas and James, Aged 8*

Strong friendship bonds can exist between grandparents and grandchildren which overcome the barriers sometimes associated with differences in age.

The three generations - grandparents/parents/grandchildren - have much to learn from one other and effective communication is essential to this learning. **Listening to each other and respecting those differences that make individuals unique are particularly important.**

### Some Ideas on Communicating with your Grandchild

- Try not to say too much, instead **listen** to what the child is saying to you
- Avoid giving unasked for advice
- Never yell at, lecture, command or hit a child
- Encourage the child to talk about their problems/feelings



## PARENTS' ROLE

*“I find it difficult to say to my mother that I think she is sometimes too hard on the children, and it worries me that the children are often reluctant to visit her”*

*Carol, Aged 37*

Parents play an important role in influencing how well relationships work between the generations. Parents are often pivotal to the success of the grandparent/grandchild relationship but can sometimes feel trapped by the demands of both.

### Suggestions for Parents

- Keep the lines of communication open between the grandparent(s) and yourself, instead of complaining that they're too involved or not doing enough
- Encourage the relationship between your children and their grandparents by letting them spend time together without you
- Never assume grandparents are ready-made childminders
- Make any important parenting rules clear, but give grandparents some leeway too
- Remember that children are very versatile and can adapt easily to different codes of behaviour



## CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

*“My koro is old on the outside and young on the inside.”*

*Arawhetu, Aged 5*

Many families today are made up of people from different ethnic backgrounds and religious beliefs. Discussing and respecting different customs, views and beliefs is important as it can help overcome problems, promote understanding and lead to positive and enriching life experiences for all family members.

### Useful suggestions

- Ensure grandparents have an opportunity to share aspects of their culture and life experiences
- Ensure all family members talk about the features of differing cultures
- Encourage your grandchildren to learn the language and customs of their cultural backgrounds
- Learn the language and customs of your grandchildren's cultural backgrounds



## GRANDPARENTING FROM A DISTANCE

*“To be a grandparent is an ever changing privilege”*

*Mary, Aged 72*

Many families have grandchildren living throughout the world, while other families who live in the same country may live many miles away from one another. A grandchild and a grandparent who have not met for some years may find it difficult relating to one another with the result that neither benefits from the relationship in a meaningful way.

### Suggestions for maintaining a close relationship

- Keep in contact frequently by phone, mail, fax and/or e-mail
- Exchange photographs several times a year
- Make your own audio cassette or video tape and tell your grandchild about your childhood as well as your daily life
- Use whatever skills you have to make something special for your grandchild, e.g. sewing, painting, woodwork, cooking



## CHANGING FAMILIES

*“If you would like a warm relationship with your grandchildren don’t leave it to chance - praise, encourage and hug them at every opportunity”*

*Ta’ase, Aged 64*

Marriage and relationship breakdown and remarriage can extend the family network and this can create new challenges and opportunities for families. Role confusion can arise when several sets of grandparents become part of the same family. Grandparents can feel unsure of the boundaries of their role and the relationship they should maintain with their grandchildren.

Open communication between all family members is necessary to ensure that existing and new relationships are nurtured and strengthened. Having the chance to share in the experience and wisdom of a new grandparent can be very positive for all the members of a family.



## GRANDPARENTS RAISING GRANDCHILDREN

*“A grandparent is a parent who has a second chance”*

*Rowan, Aged 59*

For some grandparents, raising grandchildren becomes a full time role when mum or dad can’t, or won’t, or have been found by the court not to be suitable as primary caregiver. This may occur for many reasons, the most common being substance abuse, violence and mental illness of the parents. Raising grandchildren in these circumstances can be very challenging - emotionally, physically and financially. Support and information is available for grandparents in this situation – **contact Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Trust on 0800 427 637: 0800 GRANDS.**

There is no automatic right of access or custody by grandparents to their grandchildren. However, under the *Care of Children Act 2004* a grandparent may seek an order from the Court concerning contact with or care of the child. If you are experiencing access or custody difficulties, consult a lawyer or your community law office, who will advise you of the legal situation.

## FINAL THOUGHT

*“The notion that I have contributed to two generations gives me an inner sense of acknowledgement and reward”*

*Dorothy, Aged 81*

As people are living longer and are healthier in their older years there should be many years to share with grandchildren - and great-grandchildren!

**If you would like to discuss any matters contained in this Fact sheet please contact your local Age Concern Council. Their telephone number is listed in the telephone book.**

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