

by Melinda Blau

Bridging the Generation Gap



HOW TO KEEP KIDS AND GRAND- PARENTS CLOSE

want to go home," she whined. "Grandma and I haven't finished playing restaurant." They glowed in each other's presence, and

Jennifer, now 24, still talks about her.

The grandparent-grandchild connection has no equal. "It is the simplest form of love between human beings," observes psychiatrist Arthur Kornhaber, M.D., author of *Grandparents/Grandchildren: The Vital Connection* and founder of the Foundation for Grandparenting in Cohasset, Massachusetts. "It is uncluttered—pure joy!" The relationship isn't burdened by the same "psychological baggage" as the parent-child bond, Dr. Kornhaber explains. "There's less anxiety. It's not such a roller coaster of emotions."

Because many families live so far apart, parents are increasingly rediscovering the importance of the grandparenting connection. Today's moms and dads—a growing

number of whom work outside the home—seem to be taking concrete actions to strengthen the bonds between their parents and their kids. And a bounty of books and intergenerational programs has sprouted in recent years in recognition of the value of fostering relationships between the young and the young at heart, whether they are actually related or not.

Making the Kid Connection

Love across the generations benefits children in endless ways, Dr. Kornhaber says.

Grandparents give kids a sense of their roots; they can tell them what their parents were like as kids; they teach them about life, death, aging, and how families evolve; and they support and love them—unconditionally. Grandparents can also provide an anchor of constancy in a sea of change so common in family life today, whether a child must cope with a new neighborhood, divorce, or death. "Children see their families in a very biological way," Dr. Kornhaber points out. "Their grandparents are their parents' parents, so if anything happens to them, they know that their grandparents are the next line of defense. It gives them a sense of continuity, and someone beyond their parents to teach them, nurture them, and have fun."

Sari Kramer, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in Montclair, New Jersey, says her parents are 10-year-old Sasha's richest resource. "When my mother tells her stories about my grandmother and other relatives, she is Sasha's key to the past."

The important thing to remember, Dr. Kornhaber says, is that parents are "the linchpin of the grandparent-grandchild connection." He exhorts parents to create the time and space for grandparents to be with their grandkids. "Two ingredients are essential: time and undivided attention," he says. "Leave them alone, and then go use that time to nurture your marriage."

Benefits to children notwithstanding, parents and grandparents also reap rich rewards. Moms and dads who welcome their parents into their children's lives gain a great deal—support, knowledge, a new perspective, and a sense of carrying on the family history. In a recent Lou Harris poll for the MCI Telecommunications Corporation, seven in 10 respondents said that their parents generally helped them with their children, specifically with babysitting, paying for things (Continued on page 56)

My mother, "Grandma Henrietta," died when my daughter, Jennifer, was only 4. But their few years together enriched both their lives and transformed my mother. With Jennifer, my mother was unconditionally loving, attentive, creative, and infinitely more patient than I remembered as a child. I still cherish the memory of walking into my mother's apartment to find her playing "waitress" as her 3-year-old "customer" chirped, "This hamburger is exceptionally good today, Miss." Seeing me, Jennifer's face dropped. "Oh, no Mommy! I don't

Now nothing
comes between



THE NEW FAMILY

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they couldn't afford, and pitching in to oversee their kids' homework.

And seeing your parents through children's eyes can be a magical prism. "The joy they get out of it gives me joy," says Louis Tancredi, a Manhattan-based movie producer and father of 18-month-old Skylar. "I'm glad both our parents can participate in my son's life." His mother-in-law, Sandra Sonn, a retired guidance counselor who lives upstairs in their suburban two-family house, agrees: "Skylar's presence has made me feel better about myself and given me more of a reason to enjoy life."

Reinventing the Relationship

Like most family relationships, the grandparent-grandchild connection takes willingness and work. Granted, some grandparents live too far away to get to know their grandchildren very well. But some grandparents also choose to stay away. They may fear that their adult children will think they're "meddling," or they may be

reluctant to "sacrifice" their golden years.

According to the National Survey of Grandparents conducted by Andrew J. Cherlin, Ph.D., and Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., Ph.D., sociologists at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, respectively, grandparents generally fall into three categories. Involved grandparents (16 percent) spend a lot of time, even live with, grandchildren, caring for them and sometimes acting like surrogate parents. Companionate grandparents (55 percent) have loving but more limited contact and hands-on responsibility. And remote grandparents (29 percent) are distant figures—often because of geographic separation but, in some cases, because of an emotional rift.

Grandparents in the study were often pulled closer because of divorce, although over time, the "custodial" grandparent—the one whose child retains custody—was more likely to stay involved. While some noncustodial grandparents were cut off by

angry in-laws, the study indicates this to be true only in a minority of cases, albeit an increasingly vocal minority.

Children of divorce undoubtedly fare better when their grandparents are involved. Based on her long-term study, Judith Wallerstein, Ph.D., director of The Center for Families in Transition in Corte Madera, California, and author of *Second Chances: Men, Women, and Children a Decade After Divorce*, concludes that supportive grandparents play a major role in children's adjustment, acting as mentors and "counteracting their sense that all relationships are unhappy and transient."

Indeed, the annual visit to her parents' lakefront summer home was more important than usual for recently separated Sara Cummings, a caterer in South Deerfield, Massachusetts, and her 4- and 7-year-old children. On previous visits, Clayton, 7, went fishing with his dad every morning. "I was a little nervous about going," Cummings recalls, "because I wondered how

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THINGS GRANDPARENTS DO THAT YOU SHOULD LET ROLL OFF YOUR BACK!

- They start sentences with “In my day...” or “Don’t you think it would be better if...?”
- They tell their friends what a “genius” your child is or that the baby is pretty enough to be a model.
- They say, “I can’t believe how many toys that child has”—even though they probably bought many of them.
- They buy clothing that has to be dry-cleaned or ironed.
- They let you know that they aren’t interested in babysitting by asking, “Don’t you think we have a life of our own?”
- They won’t let your child call them “Grandma” and “Grandpa” because it makes them feel too old.
- They go home when your child gets cranky.
- They seem to enjoy your kids more than they enjoyed you!

he’d feel without his dad there. But my father picked up on it right away, and he took Clayton fishing every morning.”

According to Dr. Kornhaber, four factors contribute to a grandparent’s attitude

job and her own home in Indiana to move into a three-bedroom apartment in Queens, New York, with her daughter, Sandy Byers Harvin, and son-in-law, Tony, so that she could care for her 1-year-old twin grand-

toward his grandchildren: the relationship with his own grandparents; his temperament; how his parents or in-laws grandparented; and—most important—the choices he makes about the kind of grandparent he *wants to be*. Especially in the face of economic pressures, shifting personal priorities, and the many challenges of modern family life, this is rarely a simple decision.

Ethel Byers, a career counselor, left a good

sons while their parents were at work. “It was a great risk,” Byers says. “I left a lovely place in South Bend, Indiana, and gave up my independence. But I thought about it for a long time. Sandy and Tony were having trouble finding a babysitter, and I finally decided that I wanted to help them out and to see the boys grow up.”

Seven years later, Byers has no regrets; she knows that her presence gives the boys’ parents, an editor and an attorney, peace of mind. For her part, she is enchanted—and sometimes worn out—by her grandsons, and her commitment to the family has enhanced her life in new ways.

The most important ingredient in her relationship with her daughter and son-in-law is communication. “If there’s a disagreement, we talk about it,” Byers says. “Ever since she was a little girl, Sandy and I have never had any trouble talking to each other.” Not surprisingly, Byers enjoyed a good relationship with her own mother, as well. (Continued on page 58)

What Parents Can Do

Side-stepping potential pitfalls with grandparents does take effort. Still, if you encourage grandparents' healthy involvement in your kids' lives early, the whole family benefits. Here are some guidelines.

- Build a mature, affirmative relationship with your parents when you first get married, Dr. Kornhaber suggests. "Have Grandma and Grandpa come to the last few childbirth classes; ask them to be around when the baby comes," he says. "Talk about how you want the kids raised—listen to what your parents want, and try to understand how they were raised by their parents."

- Make the grandparent-grandchild connection a priority. If distance is an issue and money is scarce, pool the family resources. Keep in touch with letters, phone calls, and audio and videotapes. Coax grandparents to send your children handmade goodies—things that were your favorites when you were a kid.

- Draw a "boundary" around you and your children. "The grandparents are certainly part of the family, but they're not a part of the parent-child family," says Margaret Kierstein, Ed.D., a psychologist in Northampton, Massachusetts. "They should not co-parent or be on the same level as the parent. They shouldn't have equal authority or equal say in how the children are raised. Rather, the grandparent assumes the role of adviser."

If parents come to live with you or circumstances dictate that you ask them to become more involved with your family—to cover for a sick parent, to pitch in after divorce, to help out financially—don't let the boundaries blur. Establish ground rules about disciplining the children and making decisions about their welfare. Expect a few glitches until everyone gets used to the change.

- If you want your parents' time and attention, ask them. Dr. Kornhaber maintains that one of the most common reasons for grandparents' noninvolvement is lack of communication. Of course, your idea of "involvement" may be different from your parents', but in the end you both want what's best for the kids.

- Know that your attitude sends an important message to your kids. When children see their parents treating the grandparents with respect, going to their house for visits or inviting them to theirs—for everyday occasions as well as special celebrations—they learn to value family ties. Even when a grandparent lives hundreds of miles away, Dr. Kornhaber says, let your child see you calling your parents, and encourage him to get on the phone.

- Carry on family traditions. Whenever the grandparents are around, urge them to tell your kids stories about the family and to teach them favorite poems, cook for them, and share other rituals and bits of family lore and tradition.

- Let your parents be a living history lesson. Mitch Chakour, a musician and composer in Amherst, Massachusetts, and the father of Alex, 4, Aleshia, 8, and stepdaughter Vanessa, 19, says that "whenever the kids learn about something that happened in history, I help them connect it to our family by saying, 'Did you know that your grandma was in high school then, but your other grandpa was only 3 years old?' It makes history come alive and lets children know that their lives are important, because what they're living now will one day become history."

- Help your parents understand who your kids are. Keep your parents abreast of new developmental accomplishments, and talk

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10 AWESOME ACTIVITIES FOR GRANDPARENTS AND GRANDKIDS

- 1 Map out the route between your house and your grandchild's.
- 2 Make a flag using symbols that reflect your family's interests.
- 3 Plant a special garden with seeds your grandchild has picked out, and have him help you weed and harvest.
- 4 Dip the flat, cut-off ends of vegetables (potatoes, carrots, peppers, zucchini) into nontoxic paints and stamp designs on paper.
- 5 Visit your library and obtain a borrowing card for your grandchild so you can check out books together when she visits.
- 6 Blindfold your grandchild, then feed him bits of bananas, cheese, or graham crackers and ask him to name them.
- 7 Throw a party for your grandchild, and let him plan the menu, blow up balloons, and invite real, stuffed, or imaginary friends.
- 8 Start a timer, then hide it under a sofa cushion, on top of a table, or in back of a basket. Tell her to listen hard and find it.
- 9 Paste together collage people with different body parts—heads, faces, hair, limbs—from old magazines.
- 10 Cut fish shapes out of construction paper and add paper clips for mouths. Attach a string and magnet to a stick—then go fish!

—Lisa Lombardi

about their interests. This will help their grandparents choose activities and gifts, as well as stimulate lively exchanges between the generations. Wise grandparents let themselves be guided by, and try to learn about, things that already capture their grandchildren's fancy—and wise parents help them do it.

■ Don't take your parents for granted. "Your parents already raised you—so that one day you'd be able to raise your own children; that's not their job," says Lois Wyse of New York City, who writes a syndicated column on grandparenting and is the author of *Funny, You Don't Look Like a Grandmother* and *Grandchildren Are So Much Fun, I Should Have Had Them First*.

Byers Harvin stresses that she and her husband do not think of her mother as a built-in babysitter. "Her weekends and evenings are hers; my husband and I would never abuse that," she says. "We enjoy having her here, the kids love her, and we know that they're getting the best possible care."

■ Don't worry about grandparents "spoiling" your kids. The truth is, kids can never get enough love. "People worry about doting grandparents, but it's more about being loved," Dr. Kramer says. "Every child should have the experience of being totally adored."

■ Don't be afraid of the past. Dr. Kornhaber observes that parents who have less than affectionate memories of their own childhood often worry that grandparents will "pass on" to their children the same "miserics" they endured as kids. His research indicates that, for the most part, this fear is unfounded. Give your parents a break; assume that they, like you, want the best for your children. Many grandparents are actually grateful for this second chance. ■

Contributing editor Melinda Blau specializes in family issues. She is the award-winning author of *Families Apart: 10 Keys to Successful Co-Parenting*, which will be published in January.