



No. 1 in the Series

THE ART OF GRANDPARENTING

Among 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.

**NDSU**

EXTENSION

North Dakota State University, Fargo, North Dakota

# The Art of Grandparenting

**Sean Brotherson**, Ph.D., Family Science Specialist

**Brenda Langerud**, Extension Educator

**Divya Saxena**, M.S., Family Science Associate

## 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 percent 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, story teller, family historian, listening ear: 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:

- **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 care-giving 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 his or her relationship with a particular child and also his or her personality.

## The Meaning of Grandparenting

When a grandparent makes a phone call to a grandchild, attends concerts together or just takes a grandchild someplace, he or she is 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:

- 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 furnish 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. (2012). *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)

**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/>

**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)

**Verywell Family for Grandparents** – This site has a wealth of resources for grandparents and other family members, including articles, tips and tools. Website: [www.verywellfamily.com/for-grandparents-4162029](http://www.verywellfamily.com/for-grandparents-4162029)

## References

- Adler, E.S., and Hoffnung, M. (2018). *Being Grandma and Grandpa: Grandparents share advice, insights and experiences*. Grand Publications.
- Binstock, R.H., and George, L.K. (Eds.). (2011). *Handbook of aging and the social sciences* (7th ed.). San Diego, Calif.: Elsevier Inc.
- Brotherson, S., Langerud, B., and Saxena, D. (2008, September). *The art of grandparenting*. Facilitator's Guide, Family and Communication Education Club lesson materials, NDSU Extension Service, North Dakota State University, Fargo, N.D.
- Johnson, S., Carlson, J., and Bower, E. (2010). *Grandloving: Making memories with your grandchildren*. Lancaster, Va.: Heartstrings Press.
- Kornhaber, A. (2012). *The grandparent guide: The definitive guide to coping with the challenges of modern grandparenting*. Independently published.
- Meyer, M.H., Kandic, A., and Suitor, 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.ag.ndsu.edu/familyscience](http://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](http://www.ag.ndsu.edu/agcomm/creative-commons).

**For more information on this and other topics, see [www.ndsu.edu/extension](http://www.ndsu.edu/extension)**

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](mailto:ndsu.eoaa@ndsu.edu). This publication will be made available in alternative formats for people with disabilities upon request, 701-231-7881. 750-4-13, 600-10-20