



iStock.com

No. 8 in the Series

THE ART OF GRANDPARENTING

Grandparenthood, as the famous psychologist Erik Erikson observed, is one of the most important and meaningful opportunities of adulthood. People, on average, tend to spend more time grandparenting (about 25 years) than being involved in parenting responsibilities (about 18 years), which highlights the substantial influence grandparents can have in family life.

In today's diverse society, grandparenting may occur in a variety of unique circumstances, including situations of divorce, immigration and other contexts. This publication explores grandparenting in unique circumstances and how grandparents can navigate family transitions, in-law relationships and other family situations.

NDSU

EXTENSION

North Dakota State University, Fargo, North Dakota

Grandparenting in Unique Circumstances

Philip Estep, M.S., Extension Associate, NDSU Extension

Sean Brotherson, Ph.D., Family Science Specialist, NDSU Extension

Jane Strommen, Ph.D., Gerontology Specialist, NDSU Extension

Grandparenting in Unique Circumstances

As grandparents, individuals can serve in a variety of crucial family roles. For example, research suggests that grandparents commonly function in roles such as protector, confidant, mediator, mentor, role model, nurturer and family historian. Through their efforts in these varied roles, grandparenting offers adults many opportunities to contribute to the next generation in a process called *generativity*. *Generativity* simply refers to contributing to the well-being of the next generation.

Sometimes, however, a grandparent's ability to function in these roles or make a contribution may be more difficult than is common or expected. Grandparenting in unique circumstances presents its own set of challenges that grandparents must learn how to navigate.

What are examples of such unique circumstances? A family's divorce, being a stepgrandparent, an adult child going to prison – all of these are examples of grandparenting in unique circumstances. For example, if your adult child and grandchildren have immigrated to another country, you face challenges in making connections that other grandparents may not need to navigate. We explore grandparenting in a variety of unique circumstances and offer ideas, strategies and resources that can assist you in your grandparenting efforts.

“Nobody can do for little children what grandparents can do. Grandparents sort of sprinkle stardust over the lives of little children.”

– Alex Haley

Unique Grandparenting Circumstances

- ▶ Divorce
- ▶ Immigration
- ▶ Military life
- ▶ Stepfamilies
- ▶ Multi-generational household
- ▶ Grandparents raising grandchildren
- ▶ Complicated family circumstances (abuse, etc.)

▶ Other: _____

▶ Other: _____

Divorce and Grandparenting

One common unique circumstance that grandparents may have to navigate is **grandparenting during times of parental divorce**. Typically, in times of family crisis and breakdown, such as parental divorce or separation, grandparents' involvement increases due to the many supportive roles they may serve.

However, grandparenting within divorced or separated families can be tricky if grandparents are estranged from or on bad terms with any of the parents or adult caregivers of their grandchildren. No matter the circumstance, grandparents must try to remain neutral during this difficult time. Divorce or separation means change and adjustment for children, as well as for adults, and grandparents can be a special source of support and nurturance in such times.

Five Tips for Supporting Grandchildren in Divorce or Separation

- 1 Many children experience strong feelings of sadness, loneliness or anger in the months and years following parental separation or divorce. As a grandparent, seek to be a "safe harbor in the storm" for grandchildren coping with such feelings. Acknowledge their feelings and reassure them of your love and support.
- 2 Parents involved in separation or divorce typically are involved with their own feelings and changes, which can limit their time, energy or patience to deal effectively with children. If possible, offer to spend time with or assist grandchildren in this time period so parents can have respite and a sense of support.
- 3 Grandchildren may look to a grandparent as a source of comfort and stability while parents go through a separation or divorce. Focus on keeping your relationship with grandchildren as normal and consistent as possible while children adjust during the time of transition.
- 4 As much as possible, show up and be supportive for grandchildren on special occasions, birthdays, graduations, school events. Be respectful of parents and reassure grandchildren of your love and presence in their lives. You can be a "grandparent cheerleader."
- 5 During the transition with divorce or separation, make the effort to give extra time to grandchildren and show extra attention and support. A child's need for attention and support increases during times of difficulty, and you can help provide stability and love that is needed.

Grandparents and Relationships with Parents During Divorce

Relationships with a grandchild's parent(s) can become strained during divorce or separation. Consider these suggestions:

- ▶ Children may look to their grandparents as a source of comfort and stability when parental divorce or separation occurs. Avoid making negative comments about an adult son or daughter's former spouse or partner even though it may be challenging.
- ▶ Do not poison your grandchildren's view of their parents or caregivers. You can acknowledge that a couple had problems without damaging children's view of their parent(s).
- ▶ Focus on keeping a good relationship with a grandchild's parents or caregivers. This is essential to ensure continued involvement with grandchildren. It may require effort, negotiation and open communication.
- ▶ Communicate openly and clearly with a grandchild's parents your desire to be present and supportive in a grandchild's life. Seek a positive working relationship and the opportunity to be present at a grandchild's special events, such as birthdays or school events.
- ▶ Understand the need for adjustments and that time with grandchildren or vacation visits may change. Try to maintain positive relationships so that occasions of being together are less stressful and future time with grandchildren is easier to schedule.
- ▶ Respect the boundaries of parents while also being present for grandchildren. Parents also are learning how to navigate their new roles in this time of transition and find what works for their family. Grandparents can support this by respecting parents' rules, routines and decisions. Seek to be present and supportive but not intrusive.

Grandparenting in Distant Circumstances

It is not uncommon for families to immigrate or relocate to a new area in pursuit of economic opportunities, a higher quality of life or education, or as part of their military service. Grandparents may find themselves **grandparenting from a distance as their grandchildren adapt to life in a new city or country.**

Grandchildren and their parents continue to benefit from the support of grandparents even when separated by great distances. Circumstances such as immigration, military life or other contexts can require creative effort in grandparenting.

Immigration and Grandparenting

Immigration from one country or region to another often places grandchildren and grandparents at a distance from each other. Grandparents can serve as a bridge between the familiarity of home and the new world grandchildren find themselves in after relocating.

Here are a few brief tips for staying connected with grandchildren in immigration circumstances:

- ▶ **Send an occasional “care package,” a personal letter or just a postcard in the mail to grandchildren.** Grandchildren find great comfort and joy in receiving such items. A handwritten letter with photos is appropriate for the youngest toddlers and teens alike, as are treats and foods that remind them of home.
- ▶ **Use any of the variety of technologies available that enable instant face-to-face and written communication to stay in touch with grandchildren and their parents on a daily basis.**
- ▶ **Share stories, family history and recipes, as well as the mundane day-to-day happenings of life, with your grandchildren.** For families who immigrate to a new country, grandparents are a link to their culture and heritage. Grandparents can assist their grandchildren in retaining their cultural heritage while navigating life in a new environment.
- ▶ **Speak to grandchildren in their native language and help them remember family traditions and values.** While grandchildren should be encouraged to adapt to their new home, children can retain fluency in their native language through regular communication with grandparents. This becomes increasingly important through time as children acculturate to their host country, adopting its language and societal norms.

Military Life and Grandparenting

For military families, a parent may need to leave for an extended period of time on deployment or other assignments. Grandparents provide a stabilizing force during such times and can aid parents in caring for their children's needs.

Depending on age, children may react to a parent's absence in a variety of ways. Young children might react with tantrums or irritability, withdrawal, sleep issues, or clinging to people or a favorite toy or blanket. Older children may experience feelings of irritability and anxiety, emotional distance and isolation, or a loss of interest in hobbies, activities or friends.

Some practical tips to be a resource to grandchildren are:

- ▶ **Listen to and talk with children during times of a parent's absence due to military duties.** Reassure them that this topic and their feelings can be shared with you.
- ▶ **Keep a child's schedule as normal as possible.** In this situation, grandparents can step in and help fill in the gap for a military parent by providing rides to soccer practice, dressing children for school or reading them a book before bed.
- ▶ **Use discussion and gentle honesty to help children face their concerns and deal with questions they might have regarding why their parent is away.** While some deployments may be routine and present little risk for the parent, children may fear for a parent's safety. For information on how to talk to children about armed conflict, see the resource list below.
- ▶ **Provide grandchildren with an object or possession that links them with the military parent, such as a favorite shirt, a picture or other personal item.**

A Sharing Memories Activity

When distance is a challenge in family life, grandparents can help by sharing memories of a grandchild's parent. This activity can deepen a child's bond to that parent even while the parent is absent. Discuss the following items from a parent's life with a grandchild:

- ▶ Favorite elements from the parent's childhood years
 - Music they followed or musical groups and artists they liked
 - Favorite foods
 - Best friends
 - Favorite activities
- ▶ Moments the parent made you proud
 - Struggles they overcame
 - Moments of accomplishment
- ▶ Funny moments
 - Times they made you laugh
 - Embarrassing experiences
- ▶ Similarities and differences
 - How is the grandchild similar to the parent
 - How is the grandchild different from the parent

Blended Families and Grandparenting

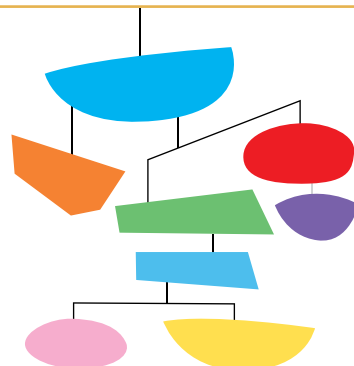
Another unique circumstance that grandparents sometimes encounter is **grandparenting in blended family or stepfamily circumstances**. Blended families often occur as a result of an adult partnership or remarriage following separation, divorce or the death of a spouse. Such family circumstances are increasingly common.

Blended families are those in which one or both adult partners have children from a previous relationship, and may include stepparents, stepsiblings, stepgrandparents and former spouses.

Grandparents might question how they fit in or what role they play in families where they are not biologically related to the children or where children have an existing relationship with their biological grandparents. Family dynamics and circumstances vary significantly among families. However, stepgrandparents can support their adult children and nonbiological grandchildren by showing the same love and care as they would for their biological grandchildren.

In blended families, here are a few practical ideas to be a support to grandchildren:

- ▶ **Pay attention to potential concerns regarding fairness or favoritism with biological versus stepgrandchildren.** The relationship with each grandchild is unique. However, avoid giving preference to grandchildren in one family setting over another.
- ▶ **Be sensitive to feelings of stepgrandchildren and their sense of being valued or included by grandparents.** If you are a stepgrandparent, be mindful of time spent with grandchildren and stepgrandchildren, as well as perceived equality in gift-giving where favoritism might be suspected.
- ▶ **Encourage stepgrandchildren to call you “grandpa” or “grandma” and express your desire to be a supportive part of their lives.** Such messages can help stepgrandchildren feel welcome and at ease in their new family circumstances.
- ▶ **Adapt your involvement with stepgrandchildren to the child’s age and maturity level as needed.** Age plays a significant role in stepgrandparent relationships with grandchildren. Younger grandchildren are more likely to develop a strong relationship with their stepgrandparents while older grandchildren may be less receptive.
- ▶ **Develop a relationship with stepgrandchildren gradually and allow trust to emerge through time.** Stepgrandparents should not force the relationship with stepgrandchildren, being mindful that relationships require trust built through time.
- ▶ **Help grandchildren understand you want to support them but not divide their loyalties to other family ties.** Stepgrandchildren may feel disloyal to their biological grandparents by accepting a new set of stepgrandparents into their lives. Stepgrandparents have the power to be a strong and positive influence in the lives of all children they welcome into their intergenerational family.



Like a mobile that shifts in the breeze, a strong wind in family life like that of a divorce, remarriage or new partnership can send it into disequilibrium. Allow the time needed for families to find their balance.

Multi-generational Families and Grandparenting

For some families, people live together across multiple generations, which results in **grandparenting in multi-generational family situations**. Families in which more than two generations are living together under the same roof are considered to be multi-generational households. Whether grandparents move in with an adult child and grandchildren, or whether they move in to live with grandparents, the result can be living as part of a multi-generational household.

“One in six Americans now live with parents, grandparents or other relatives.”

– Generations United, 2020

Multi-generational households are becoming increasingly common in the United States. They are also common in many cultures across the world.

The perks of combining households are often mutually beneficial and include: shared living expenses, reduced child-care costs, increased potential for savings, and the opportunity to provide care for aging grandparents and young children. Grandchildren benefit from daily contact with grandparents and an overall increase in good-quality time with family members.

For multi-generational households to function without friction, grandparents and parents must establish boundaries for privacy, parenting practices and household responsibilities. Grandparents do not need to be overwhelmed by child-care responsibilities and adult children do not wish to feel like teenagers again. Clear communication of expectations helps avoid unnecessary conflict between generations.

Practical Tips for Clear Communication

Pay attention to these practical tips to enhance communication across generations living in a multi-generational family:

- ▶ **The Fast Food Rule** – At a fast-food restaurant, you place an order and the server repeats it back to you to confirm that the server heard you correctly. The same principle applies in communicating with loved ones. Take the time to hear what they have to say, then repeat back what you heard to make sure you understood correctly. This simple rule helps prevent misunderstanding. Also, it works equally well with toddlers, teens and adults.
- ▶ **Check-ins** – Taking a moment to “check in” with schedules or plans helps everyone be on the same page. Before leaving to take a grandchild to school, heading off to work, or after getting back from an appointment, take a minute to touch base with other members of the household. Adult children might check in before leaving for work to let you know they will return an hour later than usual. A grandparent might check in with parents to let them know their toddler has not been feeling well. Short but frequent check-ins keep everyone on the same page and prevents miscommunication.
- ▶ **Bulletin Board** – With grandparents, parents and grandchildren living under the same roof, keeping track of who is doing what and when can be difficult. To manage multiple schedules, consider using a small whiteboard or family calendar tacked to the wall where important dates and reminders are posted. A child’s care schedule, a grandparent’s walking group – such items can be posted for all to see and plan around.
- ▶ **Using I Statements** – “I statements” can help you communicate problems or concerns without placing blame or making someone else feel defensive. Using I statements helps the speaker communicate what they need instead of using accusations, blame or demands. Here are some examples:

- Replace “You need to take out the trash” with “I would like it if you took out the trash.”
- Don’t say, “You need to give me some space!” Instead say, “I feel like I don’t have much privacy and would like some time to myself.”



Complicated Family Issues and Grandparenting

A variety of unique challenges may emerge in family life and place grandparents in the position of **grandparenting in the context of complicated family issues**. Grandparents are concerned about the happiness and well-being of their grandchildren and other family members in the best of times. When faced with unexpected challenges in the life of an adult child or grandchild, grandparents can feel overwhelmed or uncertain of how to extend support. Complicated issues in family life include struggles with addiction, abuse, trauma, interpersonal conflict or mental health concerns.

Finding Resources and Extending Support

When a complicated family issue arises, usually grandparents have no immediate road map to help them know what resources to access for help or how to extend support. However, a grandparent can make a difference by learning about the issue or concern, accessing community resources designed to assist families with the concern and engaging with support groups or organizations.

Many concerns can disrupt a loved one's life and threaten the well-being of a family member's health and relationships. Alcohol and drug misuse is common and negatively impacts millions of families. There are a variety of support groups specifically for family members of someone struggling with addiction. Grandparents might turn to such groups for support and advice.

Other issues, including abuse or neglect of a grandchild or other family member, require someone to intervene who has the best interest of the child in mind and temporarily can remove the child from the situation where abuse or neglect is occurring. Grandparents may be able to provide the love and support grandchildren critically need during such difficult times. While simple solutions aren't available for complicated challenges, many resources are available that may assist grandparents in navigating these difficult family concerns.

Support groups for family members dealing with addiction, alcohol issues include:

- Families Anonymous
- Al-Anon
- Nar-Anon
- Parents of Addicted Loved Ones (PAL)
- Local church, community groups

Building a Support Network

Supporting grandchildren, helping family members with complicated issues and managing your own needs can become overwhelming. You do not have to walk such paths alone. Take an inventory of the supports available to you.

Support and resources come in many forms. Some grandparents participate in a prayer network, others rely on family or friends, and many benefit from community volunteers and programs. Consider listing specific people you can call on for support, whether that means emotional support, advice, physical assistance or respite so you can have some personal time. If you struggle to come up with specific supports, this is perhaps a sign that you need to build your support network. Write down multiple support sources you can use or rely on below.

My Resource Network – Family, Friends, Neighbors, Groups or Organizations

| Name and Relationship | Phone Number(s) | Email Address |
|------------------------|-----------------|---------------|
| Name: Relationship: | | |
| Name: Relationship: | | |
| Name: Relationship: | | |
| Name: Relationship: | | |
| Name: Relationship: | | |
| Name: Relationship: | | |
| Name: Relationship: | | |
| Name: Relationship: | | |

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
- LaBan, E. (2009). *The grandparents handbook: Games, activities, tips, how-tos, and all-around fun*. Philadelphia, Penn.: Quirk Books.
- Wasserman, S. (2010). *Grandparenting at long distance: Connecting with grandchildren across the miles*. Brush Education.

Organizations and Websites

- Branch Military Parent Technical Assistance Center** – Resources for military families. Specific information for grandparents with adult children in the military.
Website: <https://branchta.org/help-for-grandparents-and-other-temporary-caregivers-of-military-children-with-handout/>
- 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/
- engAGED** – The National Resource Center for Engaging Older Adults – A project of The National Association of Area Agencies on Aging, this website provides varied resources on connecting across generations. Use the “Resources” link to access articles and other resources. Website: www.engagingolderadults.org/
- 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
- 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/>
- Verywell Family** – A parenting resource website for parents and grandparents. Website: www.verywellfamily.com
- Zero to Three – The Grand-Connector** – This site provides a resource for anyone caring for young children (infants, toddlers, etc.), with specific resources for grandparents.
Website: www.zerotothree.org/resources/2464-the-grand-connector-grandparentresources

Addiction Support Resources

- Al-Anon** – A free resource for family members worried about someone with alcohol misuse concerns.
Website: <https://al-anon.org>
- Families Anonymous** – A 12-step fellowship for family and friends of those struggling with a range of drug, alcohol or behavioral issues. Website: www.familiesanonymous.org
- Nar-Anon** – A 12-step program for family and friends of someone struggling with substance addiction.
Website: www.nar-anon.org
- Parents of Addicted Loved Ones (PAL)** – A support group for parents with a child addicted to drugs and/or alcohol.
Website: <https://palgroup.org>

NDSU Extension Resources on Related Topics

- FS1932 – Family Caregiving: Key Support Resources in Family Caregiving**
www.ag.ndsu.edu/publications/kids-family/family-caregiving-key-support-resources-in-family-caregiving-fs1932
- FS1982 – Grandparenting at a Distance**
www.ag.ndsu.edu/publications/kids-family/the-art-of-grandparenting-no-7-grandparenting-at-a-distance
- YD1912 – A Parent’s Role in Substance Use Prevention: Tips for Talking to Youth of All Ages**
www.ag.ndsu.edu/publications/kids-family/a-parents-role-in-substance-use-prevention-tips-for-talking-to-youth-of-all-ages

References

Conclusion

Grandparents fulfill a unique and meaningful role in family life, connecting generations, serving as role models and being supportive caregivers. For some grandparents, their family journey includes navigating unique family circumstances that make the grandparent experience more challenging. These circumstances can include parental separation or divorce, immigration or military life, blended families, multi-generational households or other situations.

Despite particular challenges, grandparents can take steps to understand the unique circumstances facing their family members and seek to provide stability and support for all their loved ones. In times of stress or difficulty, a grandparent's role becomes even more important in family life. As grandparents practice generativity and strengthen the generations following after them, families in unique circumstances increase in resiliency and are better able to bounce back from life's challenges and build stronger family connections.

“Grandparents are the dots that connect the lines from generation to generation.”

– Lois Wyse

- Adler, E.S., and Hoffnung, M. (2018). *Being Grandma and Grandpa: Grandparents share advice, insights and experiences*. Grand Publications.
- Albertini, M., and Tosi, M. (2018). Grandparenting after parental divorce: The association between non-resident parent-child meetings and grandparenting in Italy. *European Journal of Ageing*, 15(3), 277–286. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10433-018-0478-z>
- Bangerter, L.R., and Waldron, V.R. (2014). Turning points in long distance grandparent-grandchild relationships. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 29, 88-97.
- Brotherson, S.E. (June 2015). *Passing on family memories* (revised). Facilitators Guide, Family and Communication Education Club lesson materials. Fargo, N.D.: NDSU Extension.
- DeHaan, L. (2006, revised). *The influence of grandparents and stepgrandparents on grandchildren*. Extension Publication FS548. Fargo, N.D.: NDSU Extension.
- Dunifon, R. (2013). The influence of grandparents on the lives of children and adolescents. *Child Development Perspectives*, 7(1), 55-60.
- Harrington Meyer, M., and Kandic, A. (2017). Grandparenting in the United States. *Innovation in Aging*, 1(2), 1-10. <https://academic.oup.com/innovateage/article/1/2/igx023/4582358>
- Johnson, S., Carlson, J., and Bower, E. (2010). *Grandloving: Making memories with your grandchildren*. Lancaster, Va.: Heartstrings Press.
- Meyer, M.H., and Abdul-Malak, Y. (Eds.). (2017). *Grandparenting in the United States* (Society and Aging Series). New York: Routledge.
- Tan, J.P., Buchanan, A., Flouri, E., Attar-Schwartz, S., and Griggs, J. (2010). Filling the parenting gap? Grandparent involvement with UK adolescents. *Journal of Family Issues*, 31(7), 992-1015.
- 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.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. This publication will be made available in alternative formats for people with disabilities upon request, 701-231-7881. 500-4-21