

## Grandparents & the Extended Family

### **Grandparents & the Extended Family: Understanding the importance of wider family relationships for children and their parents**

Becoming a grandparent is an important step in adult life. For many people it is a joyful one, opening up possibilities for the grandparents themselves, for the grandchildren and for the parents. Grandchildren provide a new focus for family relationships and can rekindle the kind of intimacy that might have got lost along the way – enriching lives across three generations.

Relationships beyond the immediate family (mother, father, sisters and brothers) can make a positive contribution to children's emotional development and sense of themselves. An independent and developing relationship between grandparents and grandchildren is invaluable for everybody.

This leaflet will explore the ways that grandparents in all kinds of families can make a difference to children's lives and what a 'grandparental' relationship means.

### **Different kinds of families**



No single type of family dictates which relationships within it are important for children. A number of people may take a personal interest in a particular child and share a concern for them.

In today's multicultural Britain, children grow up within an enormously varied range of family situations. Some children live as part of an extended family of grandparents, aunts and uncles. In many communities this is the normal pattern of family life.

Although children of parents who divorce and remarry may lose contact with 'blood' grandparents,

they often have relationships with an extended family of stepbrothers and sisters, stepparents and step-grandparents.

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In some families – especially if the grandparents are no longer alive or are not in close contact – an uncle or aunt, godparent or friend may take on a ‘grandparental’ role.

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An innovative scheme in South London provides local families with ‘surrogate’ grandparents who share the ethnic background of absent grandparents. Young and old alike have benefited. Children have been able to experience the care and interest of a grandparent and to find out more about their own cultural roots. Children can build on their own sense of identity – which is an important aspect of self-esteem – in this way.

## **Becoming a grandparent**

Like significant rites of passage at every stage of life – starting school, leaving home, becoming a parent – becoming a grandparent presents an exciting opportunity to grow and change, and to experience a very special relationship. Many grandparents describe the sheer pleasure of spending time with their grandchildren without being burdened by the responsibilities of being a parent.

Many of today’s grandparents are young and have active working and social lives of their own. Nevertheless, becoming a grandparent provides a direct link to a whole new world and the opportunity to stay in touch with another generation and new ideas. Grandparents can find out at first-hand about current childcare methods, new toys and games, books, children’s interests and hobbies, education and popular music.

The positive sides of the experience can be very far-reaching. Having grandchildren can give grandparents a sense of continuity and reassurance that life goes on. Their life can have added meaning and purpose, giving them a renewed confidence in their usefulness and value.

### **A second chance**

Perhaps the most important part of being a grandparent is having a second chance. Through the relationship with their grandchildren, grandparents can try and do better some of the things they felt less happy about as parents. And they can do again, or strengthen, what went well the first-time round.

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Not only can they form new relationships with their grandchildren, they can also repair and rework the old ones – with their children.

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A grandfather may now have a go at being a ‘new man’, with a hands-on experience of looking after little children. This may not have been possible when he was a busy young father, nor have been socially or culturally acceptable at that time.

A grandmother may be aware of how her over-involvement with her daughter caused difficulties, but now has a chance to have a more separate relationship with her granddaughter.

## **Being a grandparent today**

Almost all grandparents are in contact with their grandchildren. But, whatever the overall trend, there cannot be any hard and fast rules. Where there has been a separation or divorce within the family, grandparents may lose touch or be prevented from having contact with their own grandchildren. At the same time, they may find that they acquire some unfamiliar step-grandchildren.

## **Attitudes towards the older generation**

In many communities that originate in other parts of the world, older people are revered and seen as an asset, passing on and helping to reinforce a child's cultural heritage. For some families now living in Britain, the pressures to adapt to a new society and abandon the old ways may make it hard to hang on to this tradition.

With the rise of grandparents as a social force, a new campaigning and lobbying organisation has been formed. Its aim is to achieve fuller recognition of the social and psychological value of what grandparents do. They recognise that the voice of older people has not yet been heard.

## **What grandparents contribute**

Grandmothers are an important source of day-care for young children today. A grand-mother may, for example, take responsibility for childcare on two days a week, allowing her daughter or daughter-in-law to go out to work part-time. Other grandparents may have the grandchildren to stay overnight or for a weekend every now and then, giving parents the opportunity for a much-needed break and a chance to focus on their relationship with one another.

Babies and young children gain particular benefit when their grandparents share their daily care. A grandparent is likely to regard this task as more than just a job and to provide the committed care and stability that babies and young children need for their healthy emotional development.

Young children can avoid the experience of change and separation in early life, which can be so emotionally disruptive and sometimes damaging. (Of course, it is also possible to achieve this in a good professional childcare arrangement.)

However, some grandparents are feeling stretched – dragooned into taking on more childcare for their grandchildren than they feel comfortable with – and wish for a life with fewer family responsibilities.

## **Keeping in touch**

While many children have close relationships with at least one grandparent or set of grandparents, this doesn't necessarily happen. Children may have only limited contact with their grandparents for a variety of different practical and financial reasons.

- Geographical distance may make it hard for children to have regular and meaningful contact with their grandparents if they live a long way away in this country or in another country.
- A grandparent may be frail, with emotional and physical needs of their own.
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Both parents, or the lone parent, may be working flat out to pay the rent or mortgage, with little time, space or money for keeping up regular contact.

- The grandparents may be at the peak of their own careers, with little time or energy to devote to grandchildren or childcare.
- Conflict within the family, or a rift between family members, may limit contact and affect how children view their grandparents.

## Being a grandchild

Grandparents are really important for the children themselves. Through their relationship with their grandparents, a child can feel another level of support and care. For children of any age, it makes all the difference if somebody has time for them.

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A child can gain not just a reliable and interested caregiver and babysitter, but someone who is their confidante and friend. Children who get extra attention from grandparents (or people who act as grand- parents to them) are likely to do better at school.

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## A bridge to the outside world

Grandparents can create a bridge for children to move between life at home with their parents and the outside world.

- Growing children who visit their grandparents may discover that time away from home can be safe, interesting and enjoyable – not just a last resort in times of trouble.
- In adolescence, close relationships with older adults who are at a step removed from the dramas of the immediate family can help to defuse the tensions that have built up.

## A link to other worlds

Children may enjoy sharing the particular skills, interests and ideas offered by grandparents that are different from their parents.

Grandfathers may have a special interest which neither of the parents share. If he talks to his unmotivated teenage grandson about what he missed by leaving school at 16, he may have far more impact than an anxious parent. Grandparents might be able to offer a sense of history to their grandchild – for example, bringing the ‘swinging sixties’ to life or talking about life ‘back home’.

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Young people who spend time with their grandparents and step-grandparents learn how to adapt to different ways of doing things. They can learn the values of respect and care for older people.

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## **Understanding family relationships**

Knowing their grandparents can help children to see their own parents in a new light. Seeing their own parent as a child to somebody can help children to understand how relationships change over time and to develop a sense of themselves.

They may have heard their parents expressing mixed feelings about their grandparents and criticising them. But they can see that, in spite of that, their parents and their grandparents love and care for one another.

## **Learning about ageing and bereavement**

Children learn about the reality of getting old from their grandparents. They may observe and share their own parents' experience of having the parents who used to be the carers now needing care themselves.

For many children their first experience of death is when a grandparent or great-grandparent dies. Though painful and upsetting, this is an important and valuable experience.

## **Grandparents who bring up their grandchildren**

### **The extended family**

Within some cultures, it is traditional for grandparents to play a central role in the lives of their grandchildren. In some circumstances they may feel that they have to take this on. In this situation, the child's main emotional attachment may well be to their grandmother.

It is not unusual for grandchildren to stay with their grandparents while their parents work or travel overseas to establish themselves in another country, or for grandchildren to be sent to the grandparents 'back home' while the parents try to make their way.

The children's response to this experience this will depend on many things, including:

- the nature of their attachment to their parents and their grandparents how well the arrangement is explained to them
- the quality of the relationship they develop with their grandparents. When it works well, the whole family gains from the experience. However, complex emotions are likely to arise. For example, when some children are 'sent away' and others stay with their parents, or children are reunited with their parents at a particular stage of development. Imagine what it must be like for a 12-year-old who joins the family in England from a home overseas with her grandparents. She has to adjust to a new country, a new school, possibly a new language, parents she hasn't seen for a long time, and maybe even a new younger brother or sister she's never met before – quite apart from being separated from her beloved grandmother



'back home'.

## **Grandparents as parents**

Some grandparents find themselves acting as parents for the second time around. If a mother is not in a position to look after her own children, the grandparents may find themselves taking fuller responsibility, possibly with a heavy heart. If the only alternative is to see their grandchildren taken into care, grandparents may feel that they have no choice.

Each of these situations carries with it a highly charged story, which will have emotional repercussions for the children as well as the grandparents. It may mean there has been a crisis in the family such as illness, abuse, neglect, or death.

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Grandparents who find themselves in this situation may love and care for their grandchildren deeply. Nevertheless, they are likely to find it an uphill struggle to summon up the emotional as well as the physical energy required to be good 'parents' in this situation and may feel resentful and pressured.

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In some cases, grandparents or other members of the extended family may take legal responsibility by becoming foster parents, but many arrangements are more informal. There is little, if any, support – including financial support – for grandparents who care for grandchildren.

## **Problems between the generations**

There are likely to be dilemmas in the relationship between grandparents and the nuclear family. Working parents face many pressures, grandparents are younger and possibly working themselves. Both the mother and the grandmother may be lone parents, or both may have new partners who have children of their own. Tensions are likely to arise between the different generations when the needs and wishes of grandparents and parents' conflict.

Patterns of behaviour often pass between generations: for example, a strong and loving relationship between mother and daughter is likely to be carried over to the next generation. Where relationships are difficult and competitive, it takes hard work on both sides to change the pattern.

For a child who may not have fully adjusted to having a stepparent, the appearance on the scene of yet more strange adults in the form of step-grandparents may be difficult to cope with. Step-grandparents may not feel like making the effort to form a relationship with the step-grandchildren, who are possibly older and less immediately appealing than small babies – and may be showing their feelings by being sulky and rude. They may resent these unfamiliar children always being around when they see their son or daughter. Step-grandparents may worry about their own lack of warm feelings towards step-grandchildren. What is important is to consider how the child feels and to treat them fairly and appropriately.

## **Making assumptions**

Parents may assume that they have a willing babysitter or childminder in the family without taking the grandparents' situation into account – their busy and demanding working lives or their desire to spend their retirement following their own special interests.

Grandparents who long to be closely involved with their grandchildren may not be sensitive to the parents' desire for privacy, and their need for time to find their own parenting style, without what may feel like interference from outside.

## **Jealousy**

Some grandparents may be unaware of how competitive they are, particularly towards their daughter-in-law. This may be true of the daughter-in-law's feelings towards the grandparents as well.

When grandchildren form a particular attachment to a grandparent, parents can sometimes feel jealous and inadequate, but may not want to admit to such negative emotions.

## **Making judgments**

Some grandparents may come across as judgmental and dogmatic, rather than supportive. Some adult children may come across to their own parents as judgmental and dogmatic, rather than supportive!

The mother who gets the message that she's not a 'good enough' wife and mother in the eyes of her parents-in-law may feel so undermined that she reduces contact with them to a minimum.

Parents or grandparents who are set in their ways of thinking about 'old people' or 'young people' may find it hard to appreciate the value of what each generation can offer the other.

## **Building new relationships**

Step-grandparents and step-grandchildren are very unlikely to love – or even like – one another until they have taken all the time, they need to get to know one another well. No one needs to feel bad about their feelings in this situation.

What is very important, however, is to behave appropriately and not to ignore the children. Step-grandparents need to be seen by their children and grandchildren to treat all grandchildren – step or other – fairly, especially over matters such as treats, birthdays and Christmas.

## **Making relationships work well**

Relationships work best when everybody feels the benefits. Many difficulties can be resolved if parents and grandparents can talk to each other and discuss their plans and expectations, without making assumptions about each other.

However great or small the part played by the grandparents, if it makes sense for them, then it will represent an important contribution to the lives of their children and grandchildren.

## **Points to remember**

- There are no easy solutions.
- The children, as well as the adults, will benefit if the adults listen to and respect each other



and, at the same time, are open to hearing something different.

- Try and put the needs of the child first and work out arrangements that can benefit everybody.

## Parents

During the pregnancy, try to talk with your partner or friends about how your relationship with the baby's grandparents might work best for everybody.

Think about how much practical and emotional support you would welcome.

You will have a link through the baby and share a common concern. If relationships have not been good in the past, this is an opportunity to improve on them – a chance to see your parents or in-laws in a new light and make a fresh start for the child's sake.

- Relationships are likely to work more smoothly all round if you show that you appreciate any help and support you get from grandparents and don't appear to take them for granted.
- If parents split up, it is almost always in the children's best interest to maintain reasonable contact with their grandparents. If grandparents are denied access, the pain of that loss for the children, as well as for the grandparents, cannot be overestimated.

## Grandparents

- Be clear about how much help you can offer.
- You will have a link through the baby and share a common concern. If relationships have not been good in the past, this is an opportunity to improve on them – a chance to see your children or children-in-law in a new light and make a fresh start for the baby's sake.
- Primitive emotions, particularly competitiveness and jealousy come to the fore when there is a new baby in the family. Unless you are careful, you – the grandparent – can find yourself getting caught up in a replay of old rivalries within the family. For instance, if your daughter
- is coping with a demanding toddler without much help from you, she may not feel at all
- pleased to see the devoted attention you are giving your son and daughter-in-law's new baby.
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If parents split up, it may be very hard not to take sides. You are more likely to be able to maintain contact with your grandchildren if you work at being neutral and non-judgmental. Ration your offers of advice and 'dos and don'ts'. Your role is to support the parents, not to undermine their confidence.

- Just 'living for the grandchildren' can be a problem. You are likely to have more to offer if you take a lively interest in other areas of your own life.

### ***About this leaflet***

*Understanding Childhood* is a series of leaflets written by experienced child and adolescent psychoanalytic psychotherapists to give parents, grandparents, carers and professionals additional insight into children's feelings and view of the world and to help make sense of their behaviour. Originally written for the Child Psychotherapy Trust they have been reviewed and updated and are now published by the ACP. The full series is available on the ACP website

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