

The Influence of Grandparents and Stepgrandparents on Grandchildren

Over the past 20 years, increased attention has been given to the importance of grandparenthood. This newfound emphasis on grandparenthood and stepgrandparenthood is a reflection of the increased life span; adults are living longer and four- and five-generation families are more common. It's also a reflection of the importance of grandparents to grandchildren.

Grandparent Influence

Grandparents and stepgrandparents influence their grandchildren both directly and indirectly. Direct influences come from face-to-face interaction, and indirect influences are realized through a third party. Consider the

phrase, "It's important to be there for your grandchildren." Being there is a concept that can mean physically being present (direct) or emotionally being present (indirect).

When you make phone calls, attend concerts together or take them places, you are directly influencing your grandchildren. When your grandchildren have been confronted with a situation and think about you, knowing you will be available to support them and that you're on their side, you are indirectly influencing them by emotionally being there. You are a role model to your grandchildren.

It's interesting to note the variety of terms used to refer to the many roles

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grandparents or stepgrandparents play.

For example:

- Stress buffer
- Watchdog
- Arbitrator
- Roots/family historian
- Supporter

One national survey of grandparents reported that a variety of activities were engaged in with grandchildren such as:

- Joking and kidding
- Giving money
- Talking about growing up
- Giving advice
- Discussing problems
- Going to church/synagogue
- Providing discipline
- Taking a day trip
- Teaching a skill or game
- Watching TV together
- Talking about parent/child disagreements

Several writers have emphasized that grandparents are very important to grandchildren. They are described as “significant others who have a great deal to do with one’s view of life.” The intergenerational contact reflects a high value for family connection. Grandchildren exposed to such contact are less fearful of old age and the elderly. They feel more connected to their families.

A North Dakota study found that stepgrandchildren tend to have less contact with their stepgrandparents and consider this relationship less important than grandchildren do with grandparents. However, the children surveyed also indicated a desire for more contact with stepgrandparents. Being a stepgrandparent can be more challenging than being a grandparent because the role is less clear. As more stepfamilies are formed, more attention will be given to stepgrandparenting, and the same influences or benefits found for grandparents will no doubt be found to be as important for stepgrandparents.

Making a Memory

Grandparents and stepgrandparents can make a lasting story of their lives for their grandchildren. These life stories grow in value to grandchildren as they grow older.

To capture one’s life story, videotape significant events, people and places for present and future generations. Even if you’re not handy with a video camera, your family will appreciate the commentary and memories shared as you visit points from your past and present.

It’s easiest to do this project as a team, with one person taping and the other providing commentary and interviews. This also allows you to “star” in your own movie. So, select a partner and begin.

First, rent, lease, borrow or purchase a video camera. Next, buy some inexpensive videotapes and practice to get used to the machine and what it can and cannot do. When you feel comfortable with the camera, purchase some high-grade videotapes to use as your master copies for future duplicating.

Next, plan on paper who, what, when and where you will be taping.

Some ideas to consider may include:

Family

- Interview parents, siblings, children, cousins and others. Tell some favorite family tales; describe family holidays, sad occasions or any other memorable events.
- Show where your family lived. Take a tour of the house, if possible. Tell how it looked when you were growing up, the color of your room, who you shared the room with.
- Go to the cemetery and walk through the family plot. Death is a part of life. Were or are there family rituals related to caring for the family graves?
- What’s your ethnic heritage? Are there things you’d like to share regarding ethnic customs? What does your name mean in your

native language? Where did your ancestors come from? When did they emigrate to this country? How did they arrive? How old were they? Does anyone keep in touch with family from the “old country?” What are some of the special stories your family has passed down to each generation?

Education

- Where did you go to school? Tour the building and grounds, if possible.
- Who were your best friends during your school years? Interview them and tell of the things you used to do together.
- Did you have favorite teachers? Interview them, if possible. If not, tell why you enjoyed them or their classes so much.
- What extracurricular activities did you participate in? Do you have any news clippings, uniforms or awards to show for these? How about team photos?
- Did you go to college or a technical school? If so, where and when? What did you study? What were the highlights of these years?

Religion/Spirituality

- Do you have a special story to tell about your journey of faith?
- What aspects of your religion/spirituality are most important to you and why?

Neighborhood and Friends

- Who lived next door, down the road or on your block? Who did you know well and spend time with? Go visit them, and record reminiscing about the special things you used to do together. Bring out the photos, if possible.
- Take a drive through the neighborhood, videotaping the countryside and places that had special meaning as you were growing up. These might include the local grocery store where you bought “penny candy,” the

softball diamond, places you used to go for walks and where you went to church.

- Who were your friends throughout the years, and what qualities do you think make lifetime friends?

Marriage

- How did you meet your spouse? How long did you court/date before you got married? Where and how did the proposal happen?
- Where were you married? Tour the church/courthouse/chapel, if possible. Describe the ceremony and your wedding day. Who were your attendants? What colors were used? What Scripture or music did you select?
- Talk about your marriage if you feel comfortable. What makes your partner special? What traits do you admire most? Any interesting or fun stories to share?

Work

- Tell about the jobs you’ve had throughout your life, including homemaking. Tour where you worked last or are still employed. What were some of the greatest challenges in your work? What were you paid on your first job?
- Describe the volunteer work you’ve done over the years. These may have been in church, at school or as an elected official. What are the fondest memories of your volunteer work? What are the benefits of volunteering?

Extras

- The sky’s the limit! Talk about hopes, dreams, regrets. Tell your favorite jokes. Visit about your favorite hobbies; show the finished products.

Once you’ve completed the taping, edit if necessary, and make copies for your children and grandchildren. Your history is captured for present and future generations to enjoy.

References

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For more information on this and other topics, see: www.ag.ndsu.edu

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