

Grandparents matter

Adapted from 'The Sixty Minute Family' and 'The Sixty Minute Grandparent' by Rob Parsons.

I wonder if your child's grandparents fit the storybook image. You know, the one where grandma is an old lady with round, silver-framed spectacles who bakes her own bread and wipes her hands on her apron while telling stories to the kids. In the modern world Gran might be quite different. She may be a successful career woman, or busy with new interests to pursue now that she has freedom from responsibility for children. Likewise, Grandpa may have decided that the pipe and slippers image doesn't suit him, and he has taken up karate instead. And whereas, in previous generations, we may have lived just around the corner from our grandparents, today we may live on the other side of the country.

But if it's true that life in modern families has changed, it's also true that most grandparents desperately want to be involved in their grandchildren's lives. And in a world where so many young people feel insecure and somewhat disconnected, children need their grandparents.

Psychologists describe the relationship between a grandparent and grandchild as "an emotionally uncomplicated form of love". (Perhaps it's because they don't have to deal with the normal responsibilities of parenthood – they don't have the 24-hour-a-day hassles and tantrums.) One child put it like this: "Being with my nan is like having a bath that is full of bubbles filled with love and with no cold bits."

The gifts of love and attention are not just emotional trinkets. They provide more of something that we, as parents are giving our children. It's something that is absolutely vital for strong growth into adulthood: *emotional health*. In a world where friends can be cruel and teachers sometimes have to say negative things, it's good to have somebody who believes in you anyway.

I can imagine what some of you are saying: "That's all very well, but you don't know how difficult my mother/father/mother-in-law/father-in-law is." Perhaps

not. But I do think it's worth trying hard in this area. It's not at all impossible for your child to have a good relationship with their grandmother, even though you can't get on with her as a mother-in-law.

It's not always possible, but if you can, try to give your parents as much quality time with their grandchildren as possible. However be aware that some take to this role more easily than others; some grandparents will love being asked to babysit, while others will not be so keen. If your need for a babysitter and your parents' need to see their grandkids coincide, that's perfect – but don't take it for granted. Make sure you talk with each other about the expectations you have and find a level of contact that works for everyone.

If your children are separated by long distances from their grandparents, here are a few ideas to help build a good relationship across the miles:

1. Ask your parents to record stories for your kids that you can play to them. It could be an event from their life, or a story from one of your child's favourite books.
2. If possible, let your children speak on the phone to their grandparents. It will allow them to become familiar with each other's voices and help build



their relationship. If you have access to a computer, using Skype is an easy way to keep in touch from a long distance.

3. Put photos of your parents around on low shelves so that your children get used to how their grandparents look. It'll make it easier for them when your parents visit.
4. Ask your parents to make a photo album for their grandchildren which includes pictures of their surroundings – home, work, hobbies, pets. It will help your child to feel they "know" them.
5. Send your children's artwork to your parents and ask them to send back a photograph of it on display in their home.
6. Ask your parents to send notes or postcards to your children now and again.

It may not always be possible, but if you can, take every opportunity to encourage and build your children's relationship with their grandparents. After all, young children can never have too many caring adults in their lives.

'The Sixty Minute Grandparent' will be published in April 2013. Why not buy a copy for your children's grandparents? Visit www.careforthefamily/sixty_minute_grandparent to order or for more details.