

# TELL... YOUR Grandchildren

*The Role of Grandparents in Healthy Families*

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## TELL ...YOUR GRANDCHILDREN

*"Make certain that you do not forget, as long as you live, what you have seen with your own eyes. Tell your children and your grandchildren."*

(Deuteronomy 4:9)

Child...Parent...Grandparent.

Three stages of life. Three distinct roles. Three threads in the fabric of the human family.

Children need both parents and grandparents. It is difficult, if not impossible, for one couple to serve effectively as both.

Most children receive instruction on how to "be a good child". Instruction on how to "be a good parent" is readily available for most adults. Still relatively scarce are instructional materials on grandparenting. It is hoped that this booklet will provide help for older adults who are facing the task of being grandparents.

## BENEFITS OF GRANDPARENTS

"Grandparents have always played an important role in providing stability and support to families," says author Dr. Jay Kesler. "[They] have the opportunity to pass on experience-based wisdom that is missing in the lives of young people. And perhaps most important of all, grandparents can serve as a spiritual catalyst to the younger generation, demonstrating for them the reality of life in Christ."<sup>1</sup>

"The grandparents' role has been described as a 'mediated role'—mediated through their children, the parents of their grandchild," says family specialist Herbert G. Lingren. The parents usually control access to the grandchild. How well the parents and grandparents get along has a great influence on the grandparents' relationship with their grandchild.<sup>2</sup>

Lingren cites research which shows that when these relationships are good, there are significant benefits to the grandparents:

- Satisfaction in knowing that their family line will be continued
- Opportunity to succeed in a new emotional role, to be better grandparents than they were parents
- Satisfaction from their grandchildren's achievements
- Support, encouragement, and companionship from their grandchildren.

The grandchildren also receive important benefits:

- Positive attitudes toward aging
- Learning of history, cultural values, and traditions
- Learning of life skills that may be of life-long benefit
- Support, encouragement, and companionship from grandparents

Freed from the pressures of discipline and material support, grandparents can often attain a quality of friendship with their grandchildren that is more difficult for parents to achieve.

Naomi was thrilled! In her arms lay her first grandchild, her daughter Ruth's son. Into her bitter life had come a ray of sunshine.

When her husband and two sons died, it had seemed like the end of life for her. When her foreign-born daughter-in-law, Ruth, had insisted on staying with her, it had seemed like a burden at first.

But what a help Ruth had been! Not only had she worked hard to provide for herself and Naomi. She had also found another husband, Boaz. In due time, their son Obed was born, who would later become the grandfather of King David. God had been watching over Naomi, and her family line would be enshrined in history (The Holy Bible, Ruth 1-4).

These benefits represent ideal circumstances and family relationships. Many families fall short of this ideal. Grandparents' involvement with their grandchildren is often reduced by geographical

or emotional distance. Or, when the grandparents are required to raise the grandchildren, the relationship may be too close to allow for effective grandparenting. In such cases, the grandchild may be a double loser. In addition to losing one or both parents, he may also lose the effective involvement of grandparents. These disruptions to children's well-being make it more difficult for them when they become parents.

There are exceptions, of course. One exception is when a young unmarried mother remains in her parents' home and keeps working to improve relationships with them. This is a demanding role for the grandparents, who may have to fill in for the grandchild's missing father. But it has been found to yield positive benefits at times.<sup>3</sup>

Laban was furious. He had never quite trusted his crafty son-in-law Jacob. However, Jacob's skill at sheep-herding had brought them both prosperity, and he wanted to keep Jacob employed. But now Jacob had disappeared, taking with him Laban's two daughters whom he had married, and the twelve grandchildren who had been born into his family.

Laban pursued Jacob and overtook him. "Why did you run off secretly? Why didn't you tell me, so I could send you away with joy and singing to the music of tambourines and harps? You didn't even let me kiss my grandchildren and my daughters good-bye."

Whatever Laban had in mind to do, God was watching over Jacob. The two men made an agreement to live in peace, each on his own side of the border they set up. The next morning, Laban kissed his grandchildren and daughters and blessed them. Then he returned home (The Holy Bible, Genesis 31).

#### GRANDPARENTS ARE NEEDED IN A CHILD'S LIFE...

- As counsellors: "From our experience, we think it would be good for you to...."
- As helpers: "Here, let me help you do that."
- As storytellers: "One day when I was a little boy, something funny happened here."
- As encouragers: "Don't give up. I believe you can do it."
- As historians: "When I was young, there were no houses here, nothing but trees."
- As examples: "Watch me and I'll show you some things that will be helpful."
- As friends: "Sure, I've got time to go fishing with you now."

- As comforters: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

Parents, on the other hand, are needed for the more directive and administrative roles in the family.

- Trainers: "We will work together on this until you learn to do it for yourself."
- Lawgivers: "God tells us in His Word that we should...."

*... He commanded our forefathers to teach their children, so the next generation would know... even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God...*  
*Psalm 78:5b-7a*

•Motivators: "If you do this, you will get a reward. If you don't there will be a penalty."

•Passing on traditions: "This is the way our people used to do this. We will learn to do it

together as a family."

- Authorities: "I expect you to do what I say until you are old enough to take responsibility for yourself."
- Administrators: "Let's plan a family schedule for this month that will give us some time for fishing."
- Providers: "I must work hard to keep the family housed, fed, and clothed."

It was a big day for Joseph and his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. They were going to visit Grandfather Jacob, who was sick.

When they came to Jacob's bedside, Jacob rallied his strength and sat up. He was almost blind. "Who are these with you," he asked Joseph.

"They are my sons," Joseph replied.

"Then they are my grandsons," Jacob said. "Bring them to me so that I may bless them."

Joseph brought his sons to their grandfather. Jacob embraced and kissed them. Then Joseph carefully placed Manasseh, the older son, on his father's right, the position of greater honour, and Ephraim on the left, to receive the blessing.

But Jacob did a strange thing. He crossed his arms, placing his right hand on Ephraim's head and his left hand on Manasseh's head. Joseph was displeased and tried to move his father's hands. "This is the older one, Father, over here."

"I know, I know," Jacob replied. "Your older son will become a great people. But

your younger son will be greater.”

Then Joseph realized that God had spoken to his sons through their grandfather. He had given them his love and the promise of a great future (The Holy Bible, Genesis 48).

Certainly there will be some overlap between the roles of parents and grandparents. Parents should encourage, counsel, and tell stories. Grandparents should also be able to exercise authority over grandchildren when necessary. But it is best when the parents are the child's primary authorities.

Before their children are born, parents should plan for effective grandparenting of their children. They should discuss these plans with the prospective grandparents, agreeing on discipline, babysitting services, and other essentials. When they live far apart, they should look for ways to overcome the barrier of distance.

#### ELDERS ARE KEY TO PRESERVING ABORIGINAL CULTURES

Aboriginal elders have traditionally received great respect from their community members. Elders play a vital role in most aboriginal communities as they bridge the gap between the ancient traditions and beliefs of their people and the influences of today. As well, many First Nations organizations across Canada have a council of elders who contribute to decision-making on matters affecting the lives of their people.

To become an elder in a community, one must earn the right. Not all elders are seniors, nor are all old people elders. Elders are honoured by community members because they have gifts of insight and understanding and they are willing to share the knowledge that they possess.

Elders fulfill many roles. They are teachers, philosophers, historians, healers, judges, and counsellors. Elders are the primary source of the knowledge which has been accumulated by their communities, generation after generation. They are respected for their wisdom and life experience.<sup>4</sup>

Even if grandparents are not recognized as elders in the community, they can still function as elders for their family.

#### EIGHT MISTAKES GRANDPARENTS MAKE

No parent is perfect. All parents make mistakes. When they become grandparents, they may continue making the same mistakes.

Here are some of the common mistakes that grandparents make.



- **The angry grandparent** has never been able to forgive his or her parents or children for hurts they have caused. This grandparent also carries grudges against others outside the family.

- **The sour grandparent.** Life has been filled with so much work and worry that he/she has never learned to laugh and have fun with children.



- **The shaming grandparent** subscribes to the outdated belief that praise makes a child proud. He/she keeps cutting family members down to size to make sure they don't get swelled heads.

- **The controlling grandparent.** There is only one right way to do things: his/her way. This grandparent is unwilling to let children and grandchildren make their own mistakes and learn from them.



- **The detached grandparent.** "I taught my children. Now I'm letting them teach theirs." This grandparent has no idea of the positive impact that a team of two parents and four grandparents can have on a child.



- **The doting grandparent** tries to buy the affections of grandchildren with lavish gifts. "If Mom and Dad say No, just ask Grandpa." He/she undercuts parental discipline with misplaced generosity.



- **The fearful grandparent** is so attached to the old ways and so suspicious of change that he/she is not interested in the new things enjoyed by the younger generation.

- **The "deaf" grandparent** is not deaf in the ears but in the heart. He/she does not seem to hear what you are saying or feeling and keeps turning the conversation around to his/her own life, interests, and accomplishments.



Can you see how patterns like these might start during the earlier parenting years? If you still have young children at home, this would be a good time to examine your parenting styles to see if there are

any patterns that could cause trouble later when you become a grandparent.

What if you have already become a grandparent like one of these? The folk proverb, “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks,” is not found in the Bible. Instead, what we find is the promise that the power of God can change you from the inside out, no matter how old you are.

If you have a parent or grandparent who fits one of these types, there may be little you can do to change him or her. Elderly people eventually reach the point in the aging process where change is too difficult or threatening to think about. When this happens, they can still serve as reminders to younger generations to mend their ways while there is still time and strength.

King Asa had been promised that if he would seek the Lord and do what was right and good, he would be rewarded. With all his heart, he wanted to do this.

However, he had a problem on his hands, his grandmother Maacah. She had outlived Asa’s grandfather and father, and she still wanted to hold on to her position as queen mother. As well, she had learned to like the religious practices of the neighbouring nations. She had set up an obscene image of Asherah, a Canaanite goddess. Of course, she and her family also went through the motions of worshipping the Lord. It didn’t matter to her that the Lord had commanded His people not to have anything to do with other religions.

When Asa’s grandmother refused to give up her practices, there was nothing to do but to remove her from being queen mother. Asa also removed her obscene image, crushed it and burned it (The Holy Bible, 2 Chronicles 15:16).

## STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE GRANDPARENTING

As you keep in mind the mistakes grandparents make, you might think of ways to make your time and presence more effective with your grandchildren.

- **Conversation.** Talk about things that interest them. Avoid making yourself the centre of conversation. Sharing your feelings, both happiness and sadness, will let your grandchildren know that you are “real”. Try to listen for the feelings beneath the words they say. Listen also to their ideas. You may be surprised at what you can learn.

- **Limits and boundaries.** Remember that you are not the parent. It may hurt to see your grandchild’s parents making mistakes. But they have the right to make their own choices in parenting, just as you did. Some valuable lessons can be learned only from struggling with these choices. Resist the temptation to discipline your grandchild unless you are clearly in charge and have permission from the child’s parents to do so. You also have your own personal boundaries. For example, don’t let your children assume that you will babysit on demand. Do it only when you really want to and feel up to it.
- **Example** is even more powerful than words. Imagine what your grandchild can learn about kindness, forgiveness, prayer, love for God, commitment, and many other virtues by seeing them operate in your life.
- **Communication.** Do your best to keep open communication with your grandchild’s parents. Learn their desires and goals for their child. As much as possible, try to follow their “game plan”. When the grandchildren learn that you are on the same team as their parents, things will go better.

It should be an enjoyable time for all when the grandchildren come to visit the grandparents. Here are some tips to make these visits work.

- **Set up a workable schedule.** Everyone has habits of sleep, eating, resting, and other regular activities. Look at both your schedule and the child’s schedule. Make minor adjustments where necessary. Schedules help build feelings of security, and children can learn to adapt if they know why it is important.
- **Let children know what the limits and boundaries are.** Children need grandparents to say No sometimes. If you have private space of your own, give the children some as well. Let them know how they can be near you but not in the way.
- **Share favourite foods.** Grandma’s best recipes make good memories for many people. Also, learn what your grandchildren like and provide some of these as well.
- **Plan simple activities.** Togetherness is the key. Simple activities can become special when they are shared with grandparents. A trip to the library, a picnic in the park, a game of miniature golf, or looking at a family photo

album can all be fun and easily managed.<sup>5</sup>

More creativity may be needed when grandchildren live too far away to visit often. Here are some ways of keeping up the relationship.

- **Letter writing.** Computers and e-mail make daily messaging possible for many families. Most of these messages will be deleted after they are read. To provide longer lasting memories, send the occasional message by regular post, in your own handwriting. Include photos with captions that tell about things in your life or in your past. Write what you would say if you had your grandchild in your arms “right now”. Include riddles, jokes, drawings, and other fun or silly things. Put yourself in the child’s place. What would you like to hear? Letters like this can become keepsakes, part of the family history.
- **Send tapes or videos.** Let the grandchildren see your face and hear your voice. Read or tell stories on tape. It is almost as good as being there. And don’t forget to call them by phone.
- **Send playful gifts.** These can be inexpensive items that awaken the imagination: a small magnifying glass; small magnets; a pocket flashlight; flower seeds; a box of plastic straws; a pennywhistle or harmonica; bubble solution and bubble pipes; marbles; a tape measure; a one-hole paper punch; out-of-style clothes for dress-up.
- **Make a book** featuring your grandchild. Staple a few sheets of paper inside a cover. Choose an event from the child’s daily life. Tell it as a simple story, with a sentence or two on each page. Illustrate each page with drawings or decorations. Make the book letter size so that you can easily send it in the mail.<sup>6</sup>

#### WHEN GRANDPARENTS ARE THE PRIMARY CARE-GIVERS

In the U.S., 6.3% of children under 18 lived in grandparent-headed households at the time of the 2000 Census. In Canada, increasing numbers of grandparents are also raising their grandchildren. The failed marriage, death, or desertion of parents sends the grandchild looking to next of kin for help. Grandparents are becoming what *U.S. News and World Report* calls “the silent saviors” of a generation of children.<sup>7</sup>

This often comes at a time when the grandparents may be facing typical mid-life issues of their own, such as career change, bankruptcy,

divorce, widowhood, remarriage, health problems, or depression. Even with the experience of raising their own children, grandparents often feel poorly equipped to start the parenting cycle over again. Age is taking its toll on their alertness and physical stamina. Resentment toward their children or their circumstances may further erode their feelings of competence as parents.<sup>8</sup> The temptation may be strong to make the grandchildren merely “hewers of wood and drawers of water”. According to some aboriginal beliefs, “If you have been raised by your grandmother you are a lucky child and will do well.”<sup>9</sup> For some grandchildren, this has certainly been true. But many others who have been raised by grandparents report feeling neglected, enslaved, or abused.<sup>10</sup>

An elder in the Canadian Arctic recently commented on this trend in a public meeting. “Children giving their children to the grandparents—back then it was never like that,” he said. He urged the land-claims organization to address the issue so that elders can be more comfortable in their old age.<sup>11</sup>

One grandmother, who is a professional family therapist, became her granddaughter’s primary care-giver when a serious illness took the life of the child’s mother. She comments on what this has meant for her.

“I fully expected that when I was a grandma, I would have an honorary place similar to the one my mother had. I would be married, retired, and toddling off on vacations to far-off places, babysitting on special occasions. I did not count on ... the restrictions to my personal time and energy.”<sup>12</sup>

This grandmother discovered that the demands on parents have changed since she was a young mother. She needed to learn new parenting skills to fit contemporary culture. For example, she needed to learn the difference between discipline and punishment.

Other modern issues include gangs, cell phones, and the Internet. Information may also be needed on legal issues, health care, and insurance assistance, psychological, emotional issues, and financial assistance.

In addition to new information, grandparent care-givers may need other forms of encouragement.

- Help in setting boundaries. Houses may need to be child-proofed.
- Help in protecting their energy level and taking time off.
- Help in asking for babysitting or other

services.

Grandparents will find that it takes longer to learn new ways than it used to. They need to be encouraged to ask for help and look for support in their community. The grandmother mentioned above discovered that it took seven people in her family to take care of one little girl.

On the other hand, care-giving may be an opportunity for grandparents to redo some of their own parenting that they or their children regret.<sup>13</sup>

Timothy was a sickly child. He spent a lot of time with his mother Eunice and grandmother Lois. Later in life he had stomach problems.

But what he learned from his mother and grandmother proved to be of eternal value. These were women of genuine faith. They passed this faith on to Timothy. From childhood, Timothy was trained in knowledge of the Holy Scriptures.

Timothy probably first heard about Jesus from the Apostle Paul. Paul saw the special talents that God had given this shy young man and asked him to join his evangelistic team. He became a spiritual father and male role model to Timothy. Later Timothy became a leader in one of the churches Paul planted (The Holy Bible, 2 Timothy 1:5-7, 1 Timothy 5:23, Acts 16:1-3).

#### PLEASANT MEMORIES OF GRANDFATHER

One grandmother recalls these memories of her own grandfather:

*He was a small, energetic man with a white beard and twinkly eyes. He could cry as hard as he could laugh, and sometimes you didn't know which was which.*

*He didn't like to get his hands wet when drying dishes, so he would use two dish towels. He could juggle three eggs at a time. He loved fried chicken and "could eat it every day and twice on Sunday."*

*He wrote me a letter when I was only one month old. I still have it in my baby book. He was looking forward to the day when I would accept Jesus as my Saviour. He told me this would be the most important day of my life. I treasure this letter very much. He set a good example of faithfulness to the Lord, his church, his wife, and family.*

*I lived with my grandparents for several months while I was dating the man who is now my husband. We had to leave very early one morning to visit his parents. Grandpa got up and made breakfast, his famous grandpa pancakes and chicken gravy. That*

*same day was his fiftieth wedding anniversary. This is a treasured memory, the four of us at the breakfast table, they in their bedclothes, eating and laughing, Grandma drinking her coffee almost boiling hot, as only Grandma could.*

*"Thirty-four years after Grandpa's death we still speak of him at family reunions in loving, respectful tones."<sup>14</sup>*



#### ENDNOTES

1. Kesler, Dr. Jay, adapted from *Grandparenting: The Agony and the Ecstasy*, Vine Books, 1993.
2. Lingren, Herbert G., "Being a 'Grand' Parent," Cooperative Extension Service Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, University of Nebraska, Lincoln.
3. Lingren, "Being a 'Grand' Parent."
4. Condensed from staff article, "Elders are key to preserving Aboriginal cultures," *Wawatay News*, July 15, 1999, Sioux Lookout, Ontario.
5. Lingren, "Being a 'Grand' Parent."
6. These ideas adapted from *Today's Native Father*, January, 2001, NYM Ministries, Dryden, Ontario; and from *The Long Distance Grandmother* by Selma Wasserman, Hartley & Marks Publishers, Vancouver, BC, 1988.
7. "Grandparents, the Silent Saviors," *U.S. News and World Report*, December 16, 1991.
8. Lingren, "Being a 'Grand' Parent."
9. Reported by Marvin Anderson, family counsellor.
10. According to Dr. Clair Schnupp, family

counsellor.

11. "Elders stuck with grand-kids," *Nunatsiaq News*, October 19, 2001.
12. Kfoury, Rosalie, "When Grandparents Parent," *Family Therapy News*, June, 1995.
13. Kfoury, "When Grandparents Parent."
14. From *Today's Native Father*, January, 2001, NYM Ministries, Dryden, Ontario.

#### **OTHER FAMILY RESOURCES FROM NYM MINISTRIES:**

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