

A grandparents' guide for family nurturing & safety

The wonder years

The most exciting thing about being a grandparent is watching your own child become nurturing. The miracle of a new baby is overwhelming, but to watch your son or daughter becoming a parent is just as miraculous. We watch with awe, pride and, sometimes, trepidation as our sons and daughters do their best to raise strong and healthy offspring. We know how demanding a job that is. We want to help. We should help. And we do.

We want to keep our grandchildren safe and sound. We want to make our homes and theirs safe havens where nothing bad can happen to them. We want to share with our own children the lessons we learned—and learn a few new tips ourselves.

The contributions grandparents make to their families are extraordinary. Some, like baby-sitting or giving them safe cribs or strollers, are tangible. Others, like providing a role model for grandchildren, are intangible but just as powerful and real. We do know that virtually every study of child development shows that youngsters lucky enough to have loving grandparents are destined to be

winners. All research on single parents shows that the future of the children is correlated with support from grandparents.

We also know that grandparents can make their children's job of parenting a lot easier. When you lend a sympathetic ear to an upset parent you provide a safe outlet for often difficult emotions. When you give your children a night off by baby-sitting, you give them and your grandchild a much needed break from the inevitable strains of the nuclear family. When your children know that, in a pinch, there is someone to step in to love their children and keep them safe, you give them the most valuable kind of support.

More and more, we see grandparents providing reliable and dedicated childcare. In fact, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that about 1.3 million children are entrusted to their grandparents every day. That same 1994 study says another 2.4 million children live in households headed by a grandparent. It means that numbers of grandparents make it possible for the young ones to grow up in stable homes and communities.

But it's the daily acknowledgement that we get from our children and grandchildren that

inspires us to develop and maintain those loving connections. What fun to watch their eyes widen and sparkle when you tell your grandchildren about how their mommy was as a small child! We know it's not always easy, that it takes thought, finesse, and devotion. It requires us to be emotionally flexible and nurturing. We have to be vigilant and make our homes safe for children. We need to take our role modeling seriously—for our children and grandchildren.

We hope we can help. Because when grandparenting works, there's nothing better. We know. We're grandparents too.

Sincerely,

Dr. T. Berry Brazelton

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Bridging the generations and building the bonds

T. Berry Brazelton

Take your role seriously—you have a lot to give. With babies and toddlers, you can be an additional source of love and care. For school-age children, you can teach family values and history. You can inspire older children and adolescents to want to grow up to be like you. To do that, you have to be a consistent presence in their lives. If you can,

offer to baby-sit regularly or when needed. That allows you to lavish all your special attention on your grandchildren. At the same time, you'll win the eternal gratitude of your children, who need downtime.

In between visits, fill in the gaps with a weekly phone call to the child at a pre-arranged time. Encourage each child to share a "news" item with you, something only he or she can reveal. That way a phone call becomes an event that everyone looks forward to.

Videotapes are another wonderful way of keeping up with your grandchildren's everyday experiences and milestones. Of course, exchange letters or e-mail and ask for packages of drawings and schoolwork. They give you insight into how they're developing and what interests them. Your positive-feedback-praise helps to build self-esteem they'll need to get along in the world.

Read a story or conjure up a fantasy for them on videotape. Let them hear it at bedtime. That way, they'll remember you between visits.

TIP

Grandparents make profound contributions to their families, so take your role seriously.

Baby-sit on a regular or as-needed basis, if you can. It allows you and your grandchildren to develop trust and understanding, and gives parents much-needed downtime.

Your active participation instills a sense of family and continuity that adds to your grandchildren's feeling of belonging and security. You can magnify that by sharing your family history. Children love stories about when their parents were young—the

time Mommy fell out of the apple tree and didn't break a bone, or when Daddy woke up at 3:00 in the morning because he couldn't wait for his birthday presents.

Holidays are another opportunity to bring the family tradition to children and create memories that help make your family close. Encourage everyone to celebrate them at your house. When that's not possible, link up by phone and take time to talk about family beliefs and rituals. Even when there is resistance about getting together, it is worth it. They never forget rituals. We need values of our children and grandchildren, and this is away to perpetuate them.

Ann Brown

For those of us who live too far away, or are not able to baby-sit, there are lots of other ways to stay close. Arrange for regular visits with your grandchildren and have them visit you. See each grandchild separately if you can. The kind of individual attention you give is key. My 14-year old granddaughter, Lil, and I love to go shopping together. Tommy, 9, comes down for a Dallas-Redskins game with Grandpa. And Abigail, 11, loves to swim with me.

- ❖ Making rituals out of meeting with your grandchildren, having things that you do only with them makes them feel unique. Besides, taking them to the zoo or to a special restaurant is fun for you, too.
- ❖ One of the things I have always loved doing with my grandchildren is taking them to the nearby playground. It's a wonderful place for children to have fun and run off steam.

But, as caretakers of our grandchildren, even for an afternoon, we need to be careful. Most serious injuries on playgrounds come from falls onto hard surfaces. In fact, grass is one of the worst surfaces because it can become hard, packed dirt.

Checking for playground surfacing that "gives" is extremely important. Wood chips, mulch, sand, pea gravel, or rubber matting are all good choices. After all, you want your time together to be full of fun, not tears. Even today, I have scars on my knees from falls on my old neighborhood playground.

TIP

Have special things that you do with each grandchild on an individual basis. It makes them feel unique and important.

Share family history, traditions, and holidays with your grandchildren. It helps instill a sense of family, belonging, continuity, and security.

- ❖ The constant contact with your grandchildren teaches you how to really listen to them, to understand what they mean to say not just the words they use. There was a time I brought my granddaughter Lil to my office for the annual "Take Our Daughters To Work Day." I asked all the girls, "Who wears a bike helmet?" Almost all of them except Lil raised their hands. I asked her why, and she said, "Gramma Ann, I look like a dork." I figured if she felt that way, so must hundreds of others who would rather go without protection than look unhip. A project we did with the Automobile Association of America confirmed the fear. So we went to the bike

helmet manufacturers who redesigned them—put in bright colors and sparkle. Now my granddaughter tells me, “You know, Gramma Ann, they’re awesome.”

- ❖ When we take our grandchildren’s words seriously and respect their opinions, they do let us know what’s going on. That strengthens the growing bonds between you and your grandchild.

Making it work

T. Berry Brazelton

Even with all the advantages of an extended family, the course of those relationships doesn’t always run smooth. Parents and grandparents are bound to disagree over child-rearing choices. The trick is in knowing how to cool the friction before the fire gets out of hand.

What most young parents need from their own parents is sympathetic support, not advice and criticism. While it’s sometimes painful to watch your children go through the trial-and-error of parenthood, it’s part of their learning curve. It’s best to let them know you’re there for them, that you’re willing and eager to listen and that you’d be glad to offer the wisdom of your own experience if and when they want it. A regular “date” with them to let your child unload is a sure way of keeping in touch.

Occasionally, our children or grandchildren will do something we feel so strongly about, we’ll want to intervene right then and there. Resist temptation. It only undermines the parents in front of the children and sets up tensions. The time to talk about the problem is calmly and reasonably and privately. Even if you ultimately disagree, it inspires trust

when you accept their parenting decisions. Remind your children of their own childhood crises and how they handled them.

Grandparents must respect their children as the parents. Grandparents are notorious for overindulging their young charges, and parents often worry that this will undercut their own child-rearing efforts. However, Grandma and Grandpa’s treats, no matter how frequent, are just one more sign to children that they are cherished. Grandparents can be tolerant, loving, and supportive, without having to discipline and instruct the way parents must. They can afford to see all the good things in a child and ignore the bad. That’s a wonderful mirror into which a child can look.

Children always know that their parents’ insistence on proper nutrition and a sensible bedtime is good and living in the most profound sense. So when it comes to major issues, grandparents should always abide by the limits set by the parents to avoid confusion and bad feeling on all sides.

TIP

Respect the rules and limits that your children set for their children. Grandparents should indulge their grandchildren-within reason. When it comes to the major issues, abide by the parental guidelines.

One of the great gifts we have is our ability to influence young children. Removed from the power struggles of the immediate family a grandparent isn’t likely to meet with as much resistance as a parent would in suggesting a child do some homework or set the table. It is one way grandparents help parents by reinforcing the values that parents want to instill.

Ann Brown

Let your children know that you made more than your share of mistakes when they were little, and that, just as they do now, you had to learn how to take good care of them. I will never forget the time when my baby daughter Laura was about to swallow something that looked to her like a piece of cherry candy. It wasn't candy. It was a bright-red glue pellet from a craft set. That is how I learned the importance of baby-proofing our home.

- ❖ Then my grown-up daughter had the fun of reminding me of those lessons when my own grandchildren were little and she brought them to visit me. She went around my house to be sure I had put all the peanuts and candies up high—and locked away the pills—and put safety plugs on the electrical outlets.
- ❖ Where babies are concerned, we can all use good advice. But as a grandparent, I try hard not to give it unless I'm asked. It's much better if I wait until I hear, "Mom, I need advice."
- ❖ It maybe our privilege as grandparents to indulge and maybe even spoil our grandchildren a bit. For example, I may buy more toys or treats for my grandchildren that I did for my daughters. But you need to be careful, too. A friend of mine, a new grandmother proudly showed me the toy she bought for her two-year-old grandson. The age label on the toy was for an older child. Like me, she thought she had the smartest grandchild imaginable, and the toy would challenge him. But those age labels on toys are often safety recommendations, not measures of skill or ability. By providing appropriate playthings, you can

spoil your grandchildren and keep them safe at the same time.

TIP

Be sympathetic and supportive when your children run into parenting difficulties. Resist the temptation to intervene with advice and criticism.

Never take your grandchildren's side in a dispute they may have with their parents. It undermines parental authority.

- ❖ We're there with the power of example. Try not to force your beliefs. Rather, in a loving and conversational way, set a good example. For instance, my grandchildren see me in my job giving back to society. They've got the idea that's a good thing from watching what I do and how much I care about child safety. They've become safety ambassadors, very interested in safety for themselves and for their friends. It's your very presence that affects them. You're a grandparent figure. If you're informal, loving, friendly, and casual, and you set a good example, it's the best way to encourage learning, values and connection that go beyond your family to the community and society at large.

First Things First – Safety

T. Berry Brazelton

Making your home safe for your grandchildren is an ongoing project that changes with each stage of his or her development. What works for a newborn isn't going to be enough for a crawling, alert 8-month-old, and certainly not for an inquisitive toddler. Daunting as it seems

now, I can assure you, it'll seem less so as you grow along with your grandchild. It's an effort that will make you, your grandchildren and their parents feel relaxed and secure.

TIP

Lavish your grandchildren with positive feedback on everything from schoolwork to arts projects. Your praise helps build self-esteem they'll need to get along in the world.

Maintain an "emergency procedure" that allows you to quickly contact your grandchild's doctor, hospital emergency room and poison control center. Keep these phone numbers by every phone in the house when your grandchild is visiting.

One way that will help you see potential hazards to your grandchildren is to get down on your hands and knees and see a room from their perspective.

Never underestimate your grandchild's ability to climb, explore, or move furniture to reach something high up. Follow the Grandchild Safety Checklist to ensure your home will be safe for your grandchild.

Ann Brown

It's important to keep in close touch with your children and respect the way they raise their own children. While you have considerably more experience in child rearing, there are still things your children can teach you. For example, when I was a young mother, I thought I was keeping my daughters safe by putting them to sleep on their stomachs. Well, parents today are putting infants to sleep on their backs—which has dramatically reduced

the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). We've also learned that putting babies to sleep on top of comforters or pillows, no matter how beautiful, may be associated with infant suffocation. Even that special old crib you've kept for your long-awaited grandchild may be dangerous because it doesn't meet current safety standards. As grandparents, then, it's important for us to be attuned to changes in child-rearing and safety practices.

- ❖ The following is a practical, no-frills, easy-to-use checklist from the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission to get you started. Use these tips to keep your grandchildren safe. (*Please note:* Many of these safety tips apply to children of all ages from infants to preschoolers, but have been broken down into age ranges for easier reference.)

For more information, or to file a complaint, contact the Bureau of Consumer Protection at:

(800) 422-7128

FAX: (608) 224-4939

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E-MAIL:

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(Information provided by U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission)

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Grandchild Safety Checklist

Young Infants

Young infants follow objects with their eyes. They explore with their hands, feet, and mouths. They begin sitting and crawling.

- ✓ Put your grandchild to sleep on his or her back in a crib with a firm, flat mattress, and no soft bedding underneath.
- ✓ Make sure your crib is sturdy, with no loose or missing hardware; used cribs may not meet current safety standards.
- ✓ Don't give grandchildren toys or other items with small parts, or tie toys around their necks.
- ✓ In a car, always buckle your grandchild in a child safety seat on the back seat.

Older Infants

Older infants crawl and learn to walk. They enjoy bath play and explore objects by banging and poking.

- ✓ Never leave your grandchild alone for a moment near any water or in the bathtub, even with a bath seat; check bath water with your wrist or elbow to be sure it is not too hot.
- ✓ Don't leave a baby unattended on a changing table or other nursery equipment; always use all safety straps.
- ✓ If you use a baby walker for your grandchild, make sure it has special safety features to prevent falls down stairs, or use a stationary activity center instead.
- ✓ Keep window blind and curtain cords out of reach of grandchildren; dress

grandchildren in clothing without drawstrings.

Toddlers

Toddlers have lots of energy and curiosity. They like exploring, climbing and playing with small objects.

- ✓ Keep all medicines in containers with safety caps; be sure medicines, cleaning products, and other household chemicals are out of reach and locked away from children.
- ✓ Use safety gates for stairs, safety plugs for electrical outlets, and safety latches for drawers and cabinets.
- ✓ Buy toys labeled for children under age 3; these are often safety recommendations, not measures of a child's skill or ability.
- ✓ Never leave your grandchildren alone in or near swimming pools.

Preschoolers

Preschoolers are very active. They run, jump and climb.

- ✓ Keep children-and furniture they can climb on-away from windows.
- ✓ At playgrounds, look for protective surfacing under equipment.
- ✓ Be sure your grandchildren wear helmets when riding tricycles or bicycles.
- ✓ At all ages, make sure your smoke detectors work; keep matches and lighters away from children.