



by Karen Stephens

## Grandparents: The Bridge Between Generations

Sherry is grandma to an Illinois grade school child named Ben. That's all I know about her. Except for one other delightful fact. Last year Ben's school invited grandparents to "Celebrate Our Heritage Day." Grandma Sherry drove seven straight hours from Kentucky to participate.

I don't need to know one more thing about Sherry; she's my kind of grandma. She burned rubber on the thrumming interstate for seven boring hours — just to spend a few hours in her grandson's classroom. If anyone had an excuse to beg off, she did. Not many adults put in a day's drive just to sit on chairs that are short on comfort, long on leg cramps, and guaranteed to numb the fanny!

But it would mean a lot to Ben, so grandma made the effort. She didn't give lip service to "being there" for kith and kin; she put into practice what so many of us preach. She mustered the energy, she carved out the time. She was THERE. Her attendance speaks volumes about Sherry's commitment to keeping the bonds of family life vital and strong. Her willingness — her eagerness — to be a tangible force in her grandchild's life shows us how to weld a loving link between generations.

If asked, I'm sure grandma would say she wouldn't have missed the day for the world; that the pleasure was all hers. And it would be true. Pride, especially in grandkids, is an age-old warm fuzzy — one of the purest and sweetest around. Grandparents savor it.

Take my friend Jim. He says if he knew being a grandpa would be such fun, he would've done it in the first place! He boasts this with a glow of amazement, outright glee! I don't have the heart to tell him he's not the first to discover it. He wouldn't believe me anyway, that's how smitten he is with baby Erica.

And the bond is just as important to kids. Rarely does a day go by without a child in our program referring to grandparents. Their voice carries enthusiasm, their eyes love, and their smile contentment.

A mentor from my grad school days writes me detailed accounts of grandparenting pleasures. Look how eagerly she anticipates a visit to her grandsons' home: "I'm bringing the boys Maurice Sendak's little *Nutshell Library*. One of the books included is *Chicken Soup with Rice*. We'll read and enjoy the little book together, and I hope to make some chicken soup as part of the production . . . After all, I am a Jewish grandmother." She ended that letter by saying, "Grandmas exist to enjoy, to support what parents are doing, to offer no free advice, to love and be loved, and to count their blessings." Yes, a heart warmer of a letter.

These examples reflect the rewards of grandparenting. But make no mistake; fulfilling the job description can also be hard work. To perform the role with style and grace, it takes an understanding heart, a patient demeanor, and a wise soul. It's not easy handing over the childrearing reigns. It requires setting aside ego and personal preferences.

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Even in the most compatible families, grandparents tiptoe a fine line, constantly seeking the delicate balance between extremes. They want to be involved, but not intrusive. They want to be helpful, but not domineering. They want to be respected, but not feared. They want to be interested, but not busybodies. Mostly they want to be welcomed into grandkids' daily lives, not just their holiday celebrations.

Most grandparents successfully create a cozy, indispensable niche within the heart of the family. Even when families live states apart, parents tell me grandparents are the first people they turn to when tykes are ill, when behavior becomes challenging, or when crisis strikes. It's as true today as it was in yester-year; grandparents are the most reliable support system families have. As it should be.

But how do they do it? As keepers of the family torch, gram and gramps must "be there" for two generations with very different needs. It requires a stretch of talent! Children need unconditional love, an unfailing ally, a lap to cuddle in. Parents need a loyal friend, a compassionate advisor, someone to prop them up when they are dog-tired!

My friend's letter alludes to one way grandparents cement family ties; they instill a sense of unity and identity. Our elders pass on cultural traditions ranging from religion to educational achievement to political persuasion. They set standards for family behavior and community participation.

But from what I've observed, grandparents' primary job assignment is being an experienced resource on basic childrearing. At wit's end parents need mom and dad for reassurance. When they ask if it's normal for a kid to put a rock up his nose, they want gram to say, "Yes, but only once." When they ask if they were ever stubborn and defiant, they want to hear, "Yes, now and then, but mostly you were the perfect child." Above all, parents want to be reminded they'll survive parenting!

Of course, hardest for grandparents is being supportive without appearing to be condescending know-it-alls. My friend's statement that grandparents shouldn't give unsolicited advice is a daunting challenge. But in most cases, it's advice worth heeding. Resentment and dependency brews if grandparents don't give parents leeway in finding their own solutions. Accessible grandparents, who do more listening than talking, end up helping the most. With ready ears, an open heart and an alert mind, they keep the problem solving process chugging along on track. Cooperative, rather than argumentative grandparents are a calming influence and a fountain of tried-and-true knowledge.

But, I'm not naïve; so let me say this. Some parental behaviors do warrant grandparents' immediate, direct, and honest judgment. Child neglect, endangerment, and abuse head my list. But all things being equal, when parents are competent, grandparents are smart to give advice only when specifically asked for it. Grandparents may find that easier to do if they remember this simple truism: Your most influential parenting advice was passed onto your children long ago — while you were raising them. Your example and the way you treated your kids in their formative years set the standard for how they treat your grandchildren today.

Hopefully, that's reassuring. However, if it's haunting, you can still support your family. Fess up to mistakes. Admit you wish things had been different. If you mean it, tell your kids you're sorry. Then take some productive steps. Refer your kids to other sources of parenting advice. Resources might include relatives, child care professionals, parenting books, videos, or classes. Some grandparents even take parenting classes with their grown children!

Being honest and taking actions are caring, responsible ways to make amends. They're constructive steps toward making life better for grandkids. And that's what grandparenting is all about!

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.