



FAMILY

Grandparents: Styles and Satisfactions no. 10.239

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Quick Facts...

Most people become grandparents between the ages of 49 and 53 and may spend as many as 30 to 40 years in that role.

Grandparents tend to adopt one of five grandparenting styles: formal, fun-seeking, distant, surrogate parent, or reservoir of family wisdom.

Age, health and distance from grandchildren are primary factors affecting grandparenting style.

Satisfaction with being a grandparent is high in most cases, even over long distances.

Grandparenting is experienced differently by different individuals, even sisters raised in the same family. The transition to the role of grandparent, as well as the experience of grandparenting itself, varies according to life circumstances, gender, generation, health, race, ethnic background, social class, and the relationship with adult children.

Additionally, grandparenting varies according to the characteristics of the grandchildren. It also changes through time as both the grandparent and grandchildren grow older.

In sum, there is no way to draw a simple profile of the American grandparent. The styles, meanings and satisfactions of grandparenting vary widely across people and over time. This fact is important when reviewing the following summary statistics on grandparenting.

Some Facts

- Most people become grandparents between the ages of 49 and 53, and may spend as many as 30 to 40 years in that role.
- In 2002, there were about 90 million grandparents in the United States.
- About 75 percent of all people 65 and over are grandparents, and nearly half of all grandparents become great-grandparents.
- A few become great-great-grandparents; 20 percent of women who die after the age of 80 are great-great-grandmothers.
- Increased life expectancy presents more grandparents with the opportunity to know their grandchildren not only as infants and young children, but as adolescents, young adults and parents.
- At birth, about two-thirds of children have all grandparents living. Increased life expectancy also makes it more common for grandchildren to have all four grandparents (or more, in the case of divorce and remarriage) alive throughout their childhood.
- Interactions between grandparents and grandchildren are frequent; nearly one-half of all grandparents report weekly contact with one or more grandchildren, and 75 percent report monthly contact.
- Among a growing group of women who are delaying child-bearing until their late 30s or early 40s, grandmotherhood will arrive when they are in their late 60s or older. That will make them grandparents at about the same time most of today's older adults become great-grandparents.
- The prevalence of divorce and unwed childbirth results in increasing numbers of grandparents who are parenting grandchildren. The 2000 Census revealed that about 4.5 million grandchildren (slightly more than 6 percent of all children) are cared for by their grandparents. African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans and women are more likely to be primary caregivers of their children.

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At the time Ruth acquired the title of “grandmother,” she was finishing her doctoral degree, had recently divorced, and was deeply involved in a community literacy program for the homeless. Looking ahead to the time when she would graduate from the university, Ruth was excited about beginning a new era in her life. Becoming a grandmother had minimal significance and impact in her life at the time. In fact, her first year as a grandmother was spent revising her dissertation and learning how to be a college teacher.

Lena, Ruth’s older sister, became a grandmother at the same time. For Lena, becoming a grandmother represented a significant experience. After almost a quarter of a century of housekeeping and child rearing, Lena was totally immersed in the role of grandmother, spending considerable time sewing baby clothes, writing letters to her daughter (the baby’s mother), and waiting for new photographs.

Eight Best Gifts

1. Spend time one-on-one with grandchildren.
2. Provide listening for their concerns as well as their joys.
3. Send special notes and cards.
4. Offer companionship for activities they enjoy.
5. Share your history and family traditions.
6. Be a role model and show that older people can be fun.
7. Show grandchildren that you accept them just as they are.
8. Love—the best gift of all.

Grandparenting Styles

Several key studies were conducted to identify styles or types of grandparenting. The first of these studies was conducted by Neugarten and Weinstein (1964) 40 years ago. In it, the authors reported five styles of grandparenting.

- Grandparents who adopt the **formal** style carefully separate themselves from the child-rearing role and offer no advice. They are interested in their grandchildren, provide special treats to indulge them, but never play the role of surrogate parent.
- Grandparents who adopt the **fun-seeking** style play with their grandchildren, enjoying them as a source of leisure activity.
- **Distant** grandparents are benevolent, but remote. They have only fleeting contact with their grandchildren, usually on holidays and birthdays.
- Those who adopt the **surrogate parent** style become the primary caregiver for the grandchildren.
- Those who adopt the **reservoir of family wisdom** style dispense skills or resources to grandchildren.

A study by Cherlin and Furstenberg (1986) identified only three styles:

- **Companionate** grandparents (the largest group — 55 percent) see the grandchild at least once every 2 to 3 months, and their relationship has an affectionate and informal quality.
- **Remote** grandparents tend to see their grandchildren infrequently and their relationship is formal and reserved.
- **Involved** grandparents also see grandchildren at least once every 2 to 3 months, and their relationship is characterized by frequent exchanges of service (helping each other with errands, chores, etc.) and by parent-like behavior, in which the grandparent is consulted on important decisions and problems.

Factors Affecting Grandparenting Style

A number of factors affect the type or style of grandparenting. Chief among them are the grandparent’s age, health and geographic distance between the grandparent and the grandchild. Older grandparents, and particularly those in poor health, tend to adopt formal or remote styles of grandparenting, whereas younger grandparents are more likely to be fun-loving.

However, this relationship may not be due as much to age and health of the grandparent as to the age of the grandchild. By the time grandparents near the end of their 60s, most of their grandchildren are adolescents or young adults and companionate, fun-seeking relationships may no longer be possible.

Lastly, no matter what the age of the grandchild, if the geographic distance is too great, contact is limited and an involved style is unlikely to emerge.

Satisfaction with Grandparenthood

Most studies on grandparent satisfaction report that adults derive pleasure from the role and that adjustment to grandparenthood is positive. The only exceptions are found in the timing and context of grandparenthood. Some individuals who at a relatively early age become grandparents due to an out-of-wedlock birth report less satisfaction from the role. Likewise, some grandparents who shoulder the responsibility of being the grandchild’s primary caregiver often report dissatisfaction with the surrogate parent aspect of grandparenting.

After studying 300 grandparents, Kivnick (1982) found that the rewards and meanings inherent in the grandparent role could be grouped into five categories.

- ♦ **Spoil** includes lenient attitudes grandparents display toward their grandchildren, and the opportunity to indulge them.

The first stage of grandparenthood covers the years from the grandchild's birth until adolescence, which many grandparents remember most fondly.

Useful Web Sites

- AARP Grandparent Page: www.aarp.org/life/grandparents
- Grandloving: www.grandloving.com
- Grandparent Foundation: www.grandparenting.org
- Grandparent World: www.grandparentworld.com
- Grandparents Resource Center: <http://grc4usa.org>
- Grand Times: www.grandtimes.com/grandparenting.html
- Retirement with a Purpose: www.retirementwithapurpose.com/family

Grandfathers are seldom centrally involved with their grandchildren, particularly in the surrogate parent role wherein the grandparent assumes primary responsibility for the grandchild's care.

- **Centrality** is the central importance of activities with grandchildren, the sense that being a grandparent gives meaning to life, and the incorporation of the role in the person's identity.
- ♦ **Valued elder** is the role of resource person for grandchildren, and the concern that children will remember them when grown.
- ♦ **Reinvolvement with personal past** includes pleasure of reliving earlier experiences through relationships with grandchildren, and reminiscences about the grandparent's own grandparents.
- ♦ **Immortality through clan** describes the grandparent's sense of personal immortality through descendants.

Lastly, many grandparents report that interaction with young grandchildren has an added benefit in that it gives them (the grandparents) the opportunity to break norms regarding age-appropriate behavior. They (the grandparents) can be foolish, giggling and playing games that their age and dignity normally forbids. The hugs and cuddles that children expect (or endure) from their grandparents also give the grandparents opportunities for touching that is generally restricted in our culture.

According to a recent AARP (2002) survey, grandparents spent an average of \$500 a year on their grandchildren. About one-half said they spent money on the education needs and basic living expenses of their grandchildren. Some of the money was in the form of gifts, especially for birthdays and holidays.

The Stages of Grandparenthood

For many adults, grandparenthood (with regard to a particular grandchild) seems to follow a three-stage career. The first stage, which one grandmother called "the fat part" of grandparenthood, covers the years from the grandchild's birth until adolescence, which many grandparents remember most fondly. The second stage covers the grandchild's adolescence, when the relationship becomes less fun-seeking and more formal, even though the grandparent and grandchild may share such leisure activities as watching television, going out to eat, shopping, reminiscing and joking. The final stage begins as the grandchildren reach adulthood, when most marry and eventually have their own children.

Grandfathers

One researcher recently observed that grandfathers are probably the least researched group in the family. Although more is known now about grandfatherhood, by far the majority of research on grandparenting focuses on grandmothers. Below are some findings from research on the role of grandfather.

Involvement. Grandfathers seldom are centrally involved with their grandchildren, particularly in the surrogate parent role wherein the grandparent assumes primary responsibility for the grandchild's care. This pattern follows what is popularly called "the norm of non-interference." Several studies, however, report that when grandfathers do interact with infants, their levels of nurturance and responsiveness do not differ from those of grandmothers.

Responsibilities. The most important responsibilities men feel as grandfathers have to do with simply "being there" — helping out, being a source of advice, and providing economic support in times of need when asked to do so by their adult children.

Ethnic Differences

Grandparenting styles and experiences vary according to ethnic background. In the United States, for example, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Italian-Americans and Hispanic-Americans are more likely to be

involved in the lives of their grandchildren than members of other groups.

Differences within these groups also exist. Italian-American grandmothers tend to be much more satisfied and involved with grandparenting than Italian-American grandfathers, who tend to be more distant. Cuban-Americans are least likely and Mexican-Americans most likely to be involved with the daily lives of their descendants. African-American grandmothers under the age of 40 may feel pressured to provide care for a grandchild, whereas those over 60 tend to feel they are fulfilling an important role. African-American men see grandparenthood as a central role and do so more strongly than white grandfathers.

Long Distance Grandparenting Tips

Call regularly.

Share pictures.

Exchange videotapes of each other.

Tape or write your stories to share.

Write letters and notes.

Have grandchildren spend a week or two with you during summer vacation.

Have a family reunion.

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