



UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
EXTENSION

Helping Grandchildren Stay in Contact with Parents

Diane Bales, Professor, Extension Human Development Specialist, and Child Life Program Director

Circular 1284-02 published on July 27, 2023



When you take on the responsibility of raising grandchildren, you may have to navigate the tricky question of whether and how to help your grandchildren stay connected with their parents. For some grandchildren, video calls or visits with their parents may help them adjust to the change of living in your home. For other grandchildren, visits or calls may add to the children's stress, or may put the children in a vulnerable position. Every family is different. You need to decide what will work best for your grandchildren.

When a Parent Can't Visit

For some children, parental visits cannot happen. In some cases, laws determine whether parents can visit and what restrictions are placed on the visit. Parents may not be able to visit at all if they have abused the child or are in prison or recovery from addiction. Your grandchildren may ask why they don't get to see their mom. Being honest with children usually is best, but what you tell them depends on their age. If the parent cannot visit, help your grandchild understand why.

Be honest when discussing your grandchildren's parents. Remember that lying to your grandchildren makes them less willing to trust you. Also keep in mind that younger children cannot understand complicated issues, so tell them only what they need to know. You might tell a preschooler or school-age child that their parent is in jail, but they don't need to know all the details. As children get older, you can give them more information. Children of all ages need to know that they are not to blame for their parent's actions or decisions. Some children may feel

better if they know their parent still loves them.

In some cases, such as when a parent is abusive or has a substance addiction, staying in contact is not in the child's best interests. Let children know why they can't see or talk to the parent. Help them deal with their feelings and know that children feel grief when they lose contact with a parent. If the child has trouble dealing with the absence of their parent, especially if they are still feeling upset over many weeks or months, professional counseling may help them learn how to cope.

Role Reversal When Parents Visit

When a parent visits children being raised by grandparents, roles are reversed. The grandparents have assumed the job of primary caregiver and are responsible for daily decisions regarding the children's lives. This role reversal can be awkward or even upsetting for parents and grandparents alike. For visits to go well, both you and the parent must be flexible, patient, and accept that you both play important roles in the children's lives. Ideally, grandparents and parents should agree to support each other and do what is best for the children. Both relationships are important for healthy development.

A visit from a parent may bring up many different feelings for grandparents. You may feel happy, sad, angry, resentful, or worried at different times. It is important to recognize and deal with your own feelings before the visit happens. Spend some time asking yourself, "How am I feeling about this visit?" Come up with some constructive ways of handling those feelings. Write in a journal. Talk to a partner, a trusted friend, or therapist. Be cautious about what you share with your grandchildren. Remember that your grandchildren will take many of their cues from you when interacting with their parent.

Tips for Smooth Visits

Visits can be a stressful time for everyone. Here are some ways you can help visits with parents go smoothly for everyone involved.

- **Be as flexible as possible with schedules.** Talk about where the visits will happen and who's responsible for transporting the children. Give the parent notice of changes in your schedule or your grandchildren's schedules. Give advance notice of vacations that you and your grandchildren will be taking.
- **Treat your grandchildren's parent with respect.** Be on time. Don't discuss problems you have with the parent in front of the child. Don't use children to relay messages to the parent.
- **Communicate with your grandchildren's parent.** Discuss any rules and discipline so you can be consistent. Share current addresses and phone numbers. Consider telling the parent what their children are doing in school and with friends, or sharing photos that the parent would enjoy seeing.

- **Don't question your grandchildren's loyalty.** Don't make children feel guilty about enjoying the time they spend with their parent. Help children feel safe and comfortable with both of you. Understand that children need love from you and their parent. Wanting to spend time with a parent doesn't mean they care for you any less.
- **Make visits part of life.** Talk about the visits before they happen, especially with young children. Help your grandchildren come up with something fun to do during the visit.

Keeping Discipline Consistent

Children are most likely to cooperate when their rules and limits are consistent. When parents and grandparents enforce different rules, children don't know what to expect. Rules should be enforced consistently, both when children are at your home and with their parent. Children need to understand that you love them, but there are rules that they are expected to follow and consequences for breaking those rules. Children need clear expectations so that they know how to behave, and limits help them know what to expect. Some children misbehave just to force you to set limits on their behavior.

When a parent first begins visiting a child, he or she may let children break the rules. Disciplining the child may be too difficult, or the parent may want the child to have fun during their time together. But being lax with discipline will only lead to more misbehavior later. During times of stress, children need a stable and predictable world. Although some children may misbehave more when under stress, discovering that the rules have not changed comforts them and helps them feel safe.

It is important to communicate with your grandchildren's parent about discipline. If you are the full-time caregiver, share your rules and limits with the child's parent before the visit. Try to agree on some basic rules that the parent also will enforce. Keep in mind what is in the children's best interest. Encourage the parent to set reasonable limits and enforce them from the very first visit. For more information, please refer to Extension publication [C 1284, *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: Disciplining Your Grandchildren*](#).

Helping Grandchildren Cope with Stress

Visits from a parent can be stressful for children living with grandparents. Children who have not seen their parents for a while may be unsure about how they will get along, or they may feel ambivalent about seeing the parent. Children feeling stress may complain of stomachaches, act anxious, have trouble sleeping, or get more infections. You can help children cope with the stress before and after a parent's visit.

During times of stress, children need a stable and predictable world. Start by identifying what is causing the stress. Children may think that the parent doesn't love them anymore. Older children may worry that they won't have anything to talk about. Help children understand that

their parent still loves them. It may be helpful to remind children why they are living with you.

Give the child some control over the visit. Let children make choices within limits. For example, they may want to choose whether the visit takes place on Saturday or Sunday. Older children may want to help decide where the visit will take place. Help your grandchildren come up with things they can talk about with their parent, such as school activities, sports, or hobbies.

Make plans in advance. Mark the visit on a calendar so younger children have a concrete idea of when it is happening. Discuss the visit positively before it actually happens so that children are prepared. Let your grandchildren know they can talk to you about the visit any time. Be supportive when they express their feelings.

When a Parent Doesn't Show Up

You and your grandchildren have been thinking about the visit all week. You've talked about the fun things they are going to do with their parent—and then the parent doesn't show up. What do you do now?

Although it may be tempting to say mean things about the parent in front of your grandchildren, that won't help them. If you are really upset, call a friend to talk about your feelings. Explain to your grandchildren what may have happened. Don't lie, but keep your explanations simple. Call the parent to find out why he or she didn't come—there might be an explanation like car trouble or an emergency.

If there is no reason, you may have to explain that to the children. Your explanations will vary based on the children's ages. A 4-year-old won't understand as much as a 15-year-old. For young children, you might say something like "Sometimes, your mom doesn't do what she says she is going to. I know you're upset and I'm sad, too."

If your grandchildren seem upset, encourage them to express their feelings. You can comfort them by saying, "It seems like you feel angry and disappointed." If appropriate, encourage children to talk to the parent about their disappointment. Explain to your grandchildren that the parent may not know that they are upset unless they say so.

In Summary

Although the grandparent-parent-child relationship can be difficult to navigate, maintaining the connection between your grandchildren and their parents is important for their emotional well-being. Encourage parent-child visits whenever appropriate, and work with the parent to make them successful. If the parent cannot visit, help your grandchildren understand why and support them when they express negative feelings. Help them adjust to this change in their lives by being present, listening to feelings, and letting them know you love them.

References

- Choi, M., Sprang, G., & Eslinger, J. G. (2016). Grandparents raising grandchildren. *Family & Community Health*, 39(2), 120–128. <https://doi.org/10.1097/FCH.0000000000000097>
- Generations United. (2017). *In loving arms: The protective role of grandparents and other relatives in raising children exposed to trauma*. <https://www.gu.org/app/uploads/2018/05/Grandfamilies-Report-SOGF-2017.pdf>
- Generations United. (2018). *Raising the children of the opioid epidemic: Solutions and supports for grandfamilies*. <https://www.gu.org/resources/the-state-of-grandfamilies-in-america-2016/>
- Guastafarro, W. P., Guastafarro, K. M., & Stuart, D. (2015). An exploratory study of grandparents raising grandchildren and the criminal justice system: A research note. *Journal of Crime & Justice*, 38(1), 137–161. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0735648X.2014.909082>
- Hayslip, B., Jr., & Fruhauf, C. A. (2019). Grandparents raising their grandchildren. In B. Hayslip Jr. & C. A. Fruhauf (Eds.), *Grandparenting: Influences on the dynamics of family relationships* (pp. 159–178). Springer Publishing Company. <https://doi.org/10.1891/9780826149855.0010>
- Hayslip, B., Jr., Fruhauf, C. A., & Dolbin-MacNab, M. L. (2019). Grandparents raising grandchildren: What have we learned over the past decade? *The Gerontologist*, 59(3), e152–e163. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnx106>
- Williams, M. N. (2011). The changing roles of grandparents raising grandchildren. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 21(8), 948–962. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2011.588535>