

Stay Close to Your Grandchildren At a Distance

Aya Isumi
Graduate Student in Family Life and Parent Education Program
North Carolina State University
aisumi@ncsu.edu

Today many grandparents live miles away from their grandchildren. Two-thirds of grandparents in the United States, about 40 million grandparents, have at least one grandchild who lives at least a day's drive away, according to the Foundation for Grandparenting. Similarly, an AARP member survey revealed that 45% of the respondents have grandchildren who live more than 200 miles away. In many cases, families are separated by miles due to the need for a better climate, and education and job opportunities.

Challenges for Long-distance Grandparents

Living apart affects relationships between you and your grandchildren in various ways.

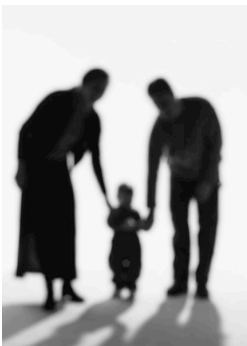
Physical distance simply can make it difficult to spend time together with grandchildren. It takes time and money to visit each other. This situation may

cause emotional distance.

Because you cannot see your grandchildren often, it might be difficult to know their current situations and interests. Also, you may find that your grandchildren are shy about talking to you when you see them after a long time. Distance, physical or emotional, can lead to less frequent contact between you and your grandchildren.

Maintaining strong relationships with your own children and their partners is also important to your ties with grandchildren. If you are not close to your child, you may feel distant from your grandchildren. Particularly, when grandchildren are young, their relationship with you depends on the relationship between you and their parents. Family structure changes, including divorce and remarriage, make it harder for some families to stay connected.

There are other factors that pose challenges to you, for example



Grandchildren are the dots that connect the lines from generation to generation.

- Lois Wyse

time differences, and cultural differences. However, distance does not necessarily prevent you from staying in touch your grandchildren. Long-distance grandparents can play an active role in their grandchildren's lives by using various ways of communicating.

Tips for Staying Close to Your Grandchildren

There are a variety of methods to communicate with your grandchildren from a distance.

1. Traditional ways are always useful !

Familiar communication methods can help you connect with grandchildren.

Letters/ Postcards/ Greeting cards

Children love getting things in the mail. Sending letters regularly is a great way to maintain contact with grandchildren. Cards for special occasions, including birthday and Christmas cards, help you have a close ties to your grandchildren, even though you cannot spend that special time together with them.

Photos

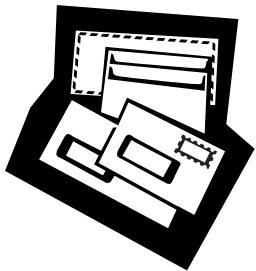
With letters, send pictures of you, your pets, scenes from a trip, or pictures of the child from a previous visit. This helps grandchildren get to know you and feel connected. Also, it is a great idea to create a photo album with pictures of you, your grandchildren and other family members. You can add notes about the pictures and memories. It is good to ask their parents to display the pictures where grandchildren can see them frequently.

Phone calls

Regular phone calls are an easy and good way to keep in touch with grandchildren. Schedule a regular time for calls. Sometimes grandchildren may not be interested in talking, but continue calling and encourage them to talk by avoiding 'yes-no' type questions. Even though you are staying in touch with grandchildren by other means, phone calls for special occasions make a difference.

Visits

Make a plan to visit grandchildren or have them visit you. Visiting



provides opportunities to create new memories together and get to know each other. Holidays, and other events, such as birthday parties and graduation ceremonies, are good time to visit. During a visit, you can share experiences with grandchildren through activities.

2. Try new technology!

Technology can seem challenging to many people. However, it is never too late to try new things. Technology can strengthen your connection with grandchildren. All of the following methods, except cell phones, require a computer and web access. If you do not have them, you can ask for support from your family members or friends. Books and classes in community centers may help as well.

Cell phones

Using cell phones, you can call grandchildren and they can reach you, wherever you are. Other advantages are text messaging and photos that you can send via a cell phone. If you have teenage grandchildren, it particularly increases

opportunities to communicate with them.

Email (Electronic mail)

Email allows you and your grandchildren to send notes back and forth. Notes can include recent happenings, family recipes, and pictures. When grandchildren are too young to read, you can email to their parents and ask them to read your message out loud.

Instant messaging (IM)

Instant messaging is real-time communication between two or more people based on typed text. It enables you to communicate by computer when both you and your grandchild are simultaneously online. If you can use a computer and the Internet, you do not usually have to pay extra money to “talk” online.

Examples are:

- AOL Instant Messenger (AIM):
<http://dashboard.aim.com/aim>
- Windows Live Messenger (MSN):
<http://windowslive.com/Desktop/messenger>

"Distance means so little when someone means so much.

- *Anonymous*

Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”

- Arthur C. Clarke



- Yahoo! Messenger:
<http://messenger.yahoo.com/>

You can download an application to use. User guides are also available on each website.

Social networking websites

A social networking service focuses on building online communities of people who share interests and/or activities. You can use social networking websites to connect with your grandchildren, other family members and friends and to meet new people. If you and your grandchildren use the same website, you can communicate through home pages and see pictures of each other. It makes it easy to keep up with recent happenings and interests. If you are interested in a social networking service, here are examples for people of all ages.

- Facebook:
<http://www.facebook.com/>
- MySpace:
<http://www.myspace.com/>

Before checking these out, it is recommended that you ask your grandchildren their thoughts

about networking. If they are happy with it, ask what website(s) they use. You may be able to get their advice and help.

Also, there are some social networking websites for older adults. They have simple features, which helps remove barriers to use. While many are only for older persons to develop online communities, some websites are older adults friendly and can be used by other generations. See an example below.

Connected Living™ is...

a social networking website designed for families and loved ones to stay in touch and share their lives.

<http://www.mywayvillage.com/>

What Families Can Do...

- Send messages
- Share and view photos
- Listen to audio books and music
- Remember important appointments
- Create a memoir
- Surf the Internet

Why is it easy to use?

- Simple interface is used
- Personal training and technical support to older adults are provided.
- Ongoing support and coaching are available

Videoconferencing

Through videoconferencing, you can talk to your grandchild real-time and face-to-face, even if they live miles away. All you need is that a computer with an internet connection, a web camera, microphone, and speakers. If you have all of these, it is easy to get started. Even when grandchildren cannot speak, videoconferencing allows you to spend time with them. It is good to set up a regular time for videoconferencing. It is one of the best methods because you and grandchildren can see each other, in many cases for free. Skype is an example of free and easy to set up videoconference service:

<http://www.skype.com/getconnected/>

Do you feel more familiar with new technology now? It is important to note that some of these services offer you several technologies. For example, many instant messengers feature videoconferencing options, and vice versa.

3. Explore together outside the home!

As regular communication shapes your ties with grandchildren, trips can help you maintain emotional contact with grandchildren by sharing special learning experiences outside the

home, or even the country. A holiday, such as summer vacation, is a good time to go on a trip. Plan a trip together with your grandchildren, considering their ages and changing interests. Some agencies can help you arrange your travels. Examples of such intergenerational programs are:

- Exploritas:
<http://www.exploritas.org/programs/grandparenttravel.asp>
- Grand Travel:
<http://www.grandtrvl.com/web/guest/Home>

Trips do not necessarily have to be fancy or expensive. Spending time together, learning new things, and sharing memories are most important.

These tips can be helpful to stay connected to your grandchildren at a distance, especially when using several approaches.

Why Staying Close to Your Grandchildren is Important?

Close relationships between you and your grandchildren can be beneficial and valuable to both. You can be a special family member to your grandchildren through providing the unconditional love, sharing your wisdom, and passing along your



family traditions and legacy. You can serve as their nurturer, role model, and historian. Likewise, interaction with your grandchildren can give you enjoyment, satisfaction, and companionship.

Distance cannot take away such unique, significant relationships from you and your grandchildren.

More Information on Long-distance Grandparenting...

- Grandparents.com:
Expert advice on long-distance grandparents (including How to Facebook)
<http://www.grandparents.com/gp/content/expert-advice/long-distance-grandparenting/index.html?navbar=>

- AARP:
Tips for Grandparenting
<http://www.aarp.org/family/grandparenting/>
- Penn State Extension
Intergenerational Programs & Aging:
Intergenerational Resources
<http://intergenerational.cas.psu.edu/IgenLinks.html>

What children need most are the essentials that grandparents provide in abundance.

They give unconditional love, kindness, patience, humor, comfort, lessons in life. And, most importantly, cookies.

- *Rudolph Giuliani*

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