

Grandparents and Grandchildren - What are the secrets of this unique relationship?

Some personal thoughts on the theme by Stefanie Allon



Although every child and every grandparent is an individual and each connection between them is unique, nevertheless it is certainly possible to say some words about this special relationship in a general way: The terms **grandchild** and **grandparent** express the potential of a grand and great relationship between someone who may look back on a long and rich life-experience and a young child who has a whole life in front of him or her.

Being a grandmother myself, I feel the wide and open possibilities in meeting my grandchildren. As a grandmother, I am no longer necessarily obliged to follow conventions; I have nothing to achieve, I no longer need to care about what others will think about me, I am no longer carrying the weight of the full responsibility for the upbringing of the child. I feel a great freedom, a wide and open space without limitations and a kind of timelessness. And next to me is the young child, for whom the world is still an open space and time is without limitations. We both are free, and we may - in an attentive and unlimited way - have experiences together in space and time and enjoy them as unique and precious.

A little walk in the public park with a 2.6-year-old grandchild can be transformed into a real adventure full of discoveries and achievements: Meeting the family of snails at the edge of our path, we are both just observing, purely admiring, feeling the mysteries of earthly existence without words or explanations. Meeting the heaps of earth and sand which were put there by workers for a building project, we both see them as high mountains which we would like to climb and explore. Digging and digging, without a timetable, until a hole allows us to discover the dimensions of upwards and downward, in front and behind, inside and outside, by climbing and crawling. We both experience with astonishment the multidimensionality of the world and our bodily relation to it.

Meeting the crows on the branches of the trees which are eager to get a piece of our cookies... Are these birds our friends? One of the crows succeeds in catching a little plastic-bag with crackers and flies



away with it. We are deeply shocked; the grandchild is weeping! These are *our* crackers! How does this crow dare to take them from us?!! The crow is on a high branch and with his sharp beak opens the little bag and starts to eat. Our calls cause him to interrupt his meal and fly away. We discover that there is still a broken cracker in the bag. The child says happily: "Oh! The crow was going to share the cracker with me!" We experience thankfulness and a new dimension of relationship with this bird. We *are* friends!

I intended to show this openness in the involvement of the old and young individuals, who are experiencing in a very personal but at the same time universal way - without intention and without a certain goal. This unintentionality makes an event so precious and new. The child being in the beginning of life, the grandparent at the end – both are able to enjoy the moment in a pure way! They can feel the quality of the moment. Time takes on a new quality which is not measurable.

Much research has been done about relationships between parents and their children. You may also find research about relationships between grandparents and grandchildren and there you may read about how old people have a different approach to time. When I asked our big grandchildren (13 and 11) about their contact to their grandparents, one of the first things they pointed out was that "grandparents always have time" or: 'they give us the feeling that they have time for us without limitations. They are always ready to receive us.'

I guess that this open warm and unconditional gesture is a typical grandparent gesture. A grandchild can feel safe in the physical, empathic, non-possessive embrace of a grandmother or grandfather. Moreover, in this open space, a lot of creativity may enter, even like in the Swiss movie "Vitus" (2006), where the grandfather (Bruno Ganz), who has phantasy and humor, and helps the overprotected child develop more freedom to dream, to explore and to enjoy childhood.

Being parents in our time can be quite demanding; combining parenthood with one's job and personal aspirations is often very stressful. One would like to be good or even perfect in all fields, and one often ends up exhausted and disappointed. And the children feel the tension and give voice to their dissatisfaction, and this makes things worse for both grownups and children. What a relief it can be for the children to be with grandparents, who are no longer under this pressure and are able to create a calmer and more balanced atmosphere.



The two boys I mentioned before both said that the difference in age does not disturb their relationship to their grandparents. They receive much through the rich life memories of the grandparents: They tell stories about their own childhood, which is far away and so different from the present childhood experiences; they tell them about happy and sad events in their lives, about the people they met, and about the birth and development of their children, and thus open for their grandchildren a new understanding of their own parents. The stories of grandparents connect them to the continuous stream of life, to the coming and going. The children appreciate the big treasures of stories, and they ask many questions: in which houses did the grandparents live? which food did they eat? which games did they play? did they have friends? how was school? how were the teachers? what did they like to learn? and they would like to hear also about the troubles they made for their teachers and parents.... Why did they choose their profession? How and where did they meet their partner? Through all the storytelling, grandparents give the children a picture of a full life.

Our eldest grandchild said this helps him to feel connected to the family in the stream of time and continuation.

We could even imagine that especially the very young children, who don't yet ask for stories and don't react to the content of the words, are mostly nourished by the rich presence of elderly people, by their peacefulness at the end of a full life and by their non-possessive, non-egoistic and non-ambitious approach.

One of the boys told me: "Everything we are not allowed to do at home we are allowed to do at our grandparents' home. Everything we can't do at home we can do here". I guess he felt a certain generosity which older people may develop. Thanks to their wider panorama in observing life, grandparents may show more tolerance in meeting problematic situations when children don't live up to the expectations of the grownup world or of themselves. Looking back to their long path of life, old people see a colorful picture — a mixture of many dark spots of failures and despair, but also many light dots of joy of overcoming and success. And they know well that all shades of colors are needed to create a full life.

Maybe this grandchild also observed and understood that life is lived in different ways. Everyone gives a



different weight to events. Meeting grandparents helps to multiply the perspectives. He also noticed that many kinds of work, which parents have no time to do or even don't know to do, the grandparents still know to do. Children are always attracted by work movements. They can experience grandmother knitting and sewing and mending clothes, creating toys, or gardening, and maybe grandfather still knows how to do some carpentry and owns and uses many fascinating tools.

This opens for children more possibilities for action and exploring, different ways of creating, additional "meaningful gestures," by spending time at their grandparents' home!

Is this a too idealistic description of the relationship of grandparents and grandchildren? I am persuaded that there is great potential in the meeting between generations for giving the child a feeling for the fullness and riches of life. And grandparents have the chance to be enlivened by the presence of young children.

More and more it is understood that in schools and kindergartens many more regular situations could be created for "grandparents" and children to meet. Since not all children are blessed by the presence of grandparents in their own families, we could initiate much more interaction between the different generations in and around our pedagogical institutions. Could this be an impulse for more connection and community life?

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