

The Gift of Grandparenting

Grandparents are special people. They have the potential to give the most wonderful gifts to their grandchildren, the gifts of sharing, of being interested in many things, and above all the gift of time. They can also wield an enormous influence in their grandchildren's lives.

I'm sixty-three years old and would be delighted if my paternal Grandfather was still alive. We shared the same interests and how I would now love to take him on a day trip aboard a working tug, to show him how he aroused my interest in life, and to share the occasion with him. Then there is my maternal grandmother who would roll up her dress and tuck it into her panties to join us in an impromptu game of cricket – in the street.

Take an interest in your grandchildren and teach them about the world in which they live. Arouse their curiosity, there is no greater gift you can give them.

Why was there a stronger bond with these two grandparents and not the others? I don't know. But it has made me realise how important it is to take an interest in your grandchildren and to teach them about the world in which they live. Arouse their curiosity – there is no greater gift you can give them.

But let's begin with some basics.

- **Gifts:** Don't buy gifts for your grandchildren without first asking their parents and getting their approval. One of the most irritating things we experienced with our parents in their role as grandparents was the fact that they would buy a gift for one grandchild for about, R200, and then four gifts to the value of R200 for the other. Their intention was good in that they wanted to spend equal amounts on each child but to the children that was irrelevant. The one child was hurt that her sibling got four presents while she received only one.
- **Rules:** Follow the parents' rules. It's OK for grandparents to spoil their grandchildren but only within the boundaries set by the children's parents. There is another side to this – when in the grandparents' house, the grandparents' rules apply. In our house our rules must be recognized. For example nothing may be touched without prior permission and animals are treated with kindness and respect. In this way children learn about different value systems.
- **Routine:** In our house there is a set routine. Meal times are at certain set intervals and junk food is a rare treat. Bedtime is inviolate – it is always at the same time. There is always a story at bedtime and a quiet time to read, or look at pictures before lights out. Children need discipline and routine is discipline. My wife and I have more than once been approached by friends whose grandchildren were impossible. Invariably these children were over tired and over stimulated, particularly by television; they never had regular mealtimes and they never had a bedtime routine. We always suggest

that no television should be allowed after six o'clock and that no violent programs be allowed. Bedtime should be at seven o'clock and lights out at eight o'clock. Without exception, our friends reported totally different grandchildren a few months later. There are few problem children but many more problem parents.

- **Values:** Grandparents have a golden opportunity to foster spiritual values in their grandchildren. I'm not talking about religious values per se, but rather the spiritual values of love, compassion, tolerance, reverence, gentleness and kindness. Whatever your religious views, remember that the values of all religions boil down to a summation of: Don't kill, Don't lie, Don't steal. Teach these values to your grandchildren. They apply to believers and atheists alike.

Another one of the values I learned from my grandfather was to ignore peer pressure. "Remember," he would say, "Because ninety-nine people do it, it neither means that it is right nor good. Follow your own conscience."

- **Support and growth:** The value of living together in a community comprising different generations cannot be too greatly stressed. Not only is there a support system, and a mutual learning about the values of other generations, but there is also an understanding of the cycles of birth, life and death. I was nineteen when my paternal grandfather died at home. I'll never forget the look of peace on his face after the doctor had laid him out. I learned a lot about dying that day, and of supporting others – and all of it was positive. The sense of ageing or loss will be replaced by a sense of continuity if our grandchildren learn about life's cycles.
- **Bonding and Respect:** The need for a bond between grandparents and grandchildren does not necessarily extend only to familial relationships. In the Kwa-Zulu Natal Midlands a very special person, Dr Lindi Bosman, has created a wonderful situation. Her raw material was an old age home and delinquent children. She houses the children upstairs and the older folk downstairs. Then she encourages them to adopt each other. What a wonderful success story, the delinquents learn all about love and belonging while the older folk have someone to love, to care for and to teach life's values. As a bonus it gives them a purpose and a new vigour in life.
- **Stimulation, curiosity, learning together:** I feel that the greatest gift that you can give your grandchildren is a sense of curiosity, of wonder. All too often busy parents fob off questions. Wrong. Encourage your grandchildren to ask "Why?" and "Why not?" Don't be afraid to say I don't know – then go and find out together. Never lie to your grandchildren. If they ask you in Woolworths what fornication means, explain it, there and then. Do not hide either life, or the truth from them.

Not only keep a keen eye on what interests your grandchildren but expose them to new experiences all the time by doing things. Physical activity is important for hand-eye coordination. Jigsaw puzzles, board games such as Snakes and Ladders, Ludo, Monopoly and Dominoes are also valuable tools to stimulate young minds.

Show your grandchildren how the world works; teach them about the geography of the world and the cultures of the different peoples. Take them to museums, to the zoo and to the planetarium. Teach them to cook, to sew and to wash a car. Teach them the value of work, and teach them to like work. They are all going to have to work all their lives and it's just so much more fun if you enjoy what you are doing.

- **T.versus Other activities:** Never be tempted to plunk your grandchildren in front of the television when they visit; in fact the television should be off. There are endless things in nature which can be shared with them. What are clouds? What makes them? What are the different types called? Teach them all about the birds in your garden or in the park. What do different birds do? Encourage them to find out about the different plants in your garden and what their purposes are. Give them a patch of their own to plant things. If the weather is inclement teach them about different kinds of music. Take them on a journey around the world with your atlas. Draw a blank map of the world and together fill in the names of the countries and their capitals. Find out which countries produce crops and which supply raw materials.
- **Reading and Writing:** Reading is of paramount importance. Read to your grandchildren - often. Frank Pritchard, who, with his partner, ran a very successful computer programmer training school, always maintained that only those who read copiously made good programmers. Take them to the library to do research, to find out how various things work, to learn about different cultures. Learn together.

Encourage them to write about they did and saw today. The three R's **are** important no matter what the current trends are. Encourage them to write a diary of the times spent with you. This can be an on-going project and one which they can take home to share with their parents.

- **Remember:** Children are skilled imitators and learn by example. Teach them to respect everything, animate and inanimate. They adore you and want to copy you. Make sure that your actions are exemplary. They will imitate the good and the bad.

Enjoy your grandchildren and give them the twin gifts of curiosity and reverence. You have the time to engender curiosity, to engender a love of learning, to teach them to respect all life. There is no greater legacy which you can give them.