

Good grandparents go the distance

One of the hardest things for grandparents is being separated from the little apples of their eye, the grandchildren.

When the children live a long way away, it's understandable if grandparents feel they are missing out. But this does not mean grandparents don't have an important place in the children's lives. It's up to you to create that special place and relationship with the grandchildren who live at a distance, whether as a result of employment or marital separation.

Being a grandparent from a distance is still about creating that special relationship, just in a different form. It's about keeping in touch by using videos, letters and emails. Phone calls can be a source of pleasure and excitement and a way of maintaining your grandparent relationships. Creating storybooks of the times of your lives that you spend together is another way of strengthening the contact. Remember the special events when you have seen the grandchildren, such as Christmas, birthdays and holidays, and put photos of them in scrapbook.

This is the way you create a history the two of you can share and look back on as the child gets older. Because you can't always be there at the special events in their lives, get them to send you photos of those events and listen to their stories of what they did at school or what they will be doing at a concert next week. Get them to draw pictures of themselves in these events and use them to create a story book.

Sharing old family stories is another way to strengthen that connection – because grandparents are the keepers of family memories, sharing them with the grandchildren can create a bond. Create a family tree – kids love seeing how they are descended from the previous generations. As the children get older, there may be special holidays with grandma and grandpa which remain significant in a child's mind for years.

If you are a grandparent whose child and spouse have separated, the situation is rather more complicated, but there are ways to maintain your relationship with the grandchildren. It's important to try to hold a neutral position that acknowledges each parent's difficulties, in the parenting situation and in the adult relationship.

It's so easy to apportion blame when the situation feels unfair, so try to realize that each parent has their own position, and that you have the privilege of being able to sit outside this conflict. To the grandchildren, you can be someone quite separate from mum's and dad's problems, so you can give support to the child.

Be there and available for the grandchildren and don't get pulled into the conflicts between their parents. If you stay neutral, you are in a position to offer support to both partners, because both are now single parents and need some time out – something you can provide.

Having time out from the children is necessary for the former partners to start healing their wounds, and the grandchildren can benefit from the support grandparents give during this stressful time.

If you are struggling, grandparents groups and programs, run by National Seniors and Relationships Australia can help. So if your grandparent relationship has more difficulties than most, keep working at it and don't give up – you are still very important in your grandchildren's lives.

Survival tips

- **If you are separated by distance from your children, keep in touch by video, phone, email or letters.**
- **Create storybooks of memories from important times you have shared with your grandchildren.**
- **If your child and spouse have separated, maintain a neutral position outside their conflict so you can sustain a supportive relationship with your grandchildren.**