

CONTEMPORARY GRANDPARENTING

DO NOT BE AFRAID OR DISCOURAGED, FOR
THE LORD IS THE ONE WHO GOES BEFORE
YOU. HE WILL BE WITH YOU; HE WILL
NEITHER FAIL YOU NOR FORSAKE YOU.

DEUTERONOMY 31:8 NLT

TO EXIST IS TO CHANGE; TO CHANGE
IS TO MATURE; TO MATURE IS TO GO ON
CREATING ONESELF ENDLESSLY.

HENRI BERGSON

Ruth, a sophomore in college, stopped by her grandmother's house on the way to her parents' home for spring break. Her grandmother listened eagerly to her granddaughter's chatter about college life and the courses she was taking. Ruth said, "Grandma, you probably don't know all this new computer language we students have to learn. In my computer class we are discussing kilobytes, megabytes, gigabytes, terabytes and things like that. In fact, I have to spend a lot

of time during my spring break writing a 12 page term paper.” Her grandmother asked, “Well...are you going to ‘Google’ the research for your term paper? In my computer class at the Shepherd Center at First Church the young teacher said that would save a lot of time.¹”

This story illustrates one of the major ways grandparenting has changed in a computer driven society. When grandparenting is the topic of conversation nowadays we are hearing a new set of jargon such as *fly-in grandparent*, *bonus grandparent*, *grandparenting power*, *wisdom giver*, and *serial grandparents*. Likewise when computers take center stage in conversations, we’re hearing a whole new language. Today we hear words like *kilobyte*, *megabyte*, *gigabyte*, and soon we will be hearing of *terabyte*, and *petabyte*. Everything in our lives is now somehow influenced by computers, the Internet, high definition television, wireless telephones, cell-phones, digital cameras, webphones, etc.

What does all of this advanced technology mean to family relationships when grandparents spend so much time trying to learn so many new skills? To begin answering such a question, let’s take a closer look at where computers and other devices are influencing most of our relationships. It is, in fact, difficult these days to separate technology from relationships. For example, in the past we may have used pencil and paper to write a letter, put a three cent stamp on the envelope, and put it in the mail. We expected the letter to get to our family or friend within a week. When we received a telephone call we usually had to rush to the room where the telephone was attached to the wall. The family had only one telephone and it was on a table in the living room and could not be moved to

1 This story is used for illustration only. It, like most of the stories in this book, unless otherwise indicated, is a composite drawn from stories told the authors in conferences with grandparents.

other parts of the house. Today, seldom do we reach for pen and paper or a telephone that is connected to the wall to send messages to one another. Instead, we reach for the laptop or the keyboard and begin speaking to someone at any time, any place through e-mail. Or, we reach in our pocket or purse to send or receive a telephone call or text message on our cell phone. Technology, it seems, has caught up with what was science fiction when we were growing up. Most can remember the comic strip where Dick Tracy could call his staff on a wrist video watch. Today, grandparents, via a video webcam mounted on the computer monitor, can not only speak to their grandchildren but instantly observe their growth spurts. This technology, regardless of its shortcomings, has spread throughout almost every area of our lives, such as dating, family, education, entertainment, travel, and religion.

It's easy to see how technology has blended with grandparenting. In fact, this blending has been so successful that we are now faced with some new realities of grandparenting.

New Realities of Grandparenting

Traditionally, grandparents were respected in the home and in the community. They owned the land and their knowledge was appreciated. Family life was essentially what some refer to as "country living." Families, including grandparents, children, and grandchildren, lived in one house, ate in the same kitchen, and everyone had specific chores that helped keep the farm producing and providing enough money for the family to survive. In this setting grandparents were seen as a source of "how to" knowledge. They were solid rocks on which the family built a strong value system.

Grandparents in Bible times demonstrated what it meant to follow biblical teachings in every aspect of life. They relied heavily on God's guidance and believed in keeping the Ten Commandments. Those who were faithful saw the fruits of their lives lived out in their grandchildren. One example of this is seen in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, where the apostle Paul reminds the young man, Timothy, of the importance of his grandmother Lois. She, along with his mother Eunice, was responsible for shaping Timothy's character.

Although the number of years grandparents had with their grandchildren was short in previous generations, they equipped the family with what it needed to survive and prosper. Now, as we are moving into what some call the "postmodern era," we often wonder how we have strayed from reliance on God's Word as our guide to a "Disneyworld" of multiple choices and styles. We now live in a world where what people believe about right and wrong is flexible and almost ignores biblical teachings. The trend among younger generations is to reject absolute standards. Sources of values such as the Bible, church doctrine, and the rule of law are no longer accepted as ultimate authority.

As the old Alka-Seltzer slogan stated, "Perhaps the circumstances won't change; but you can." If grandparents are to maintain a positive presence in their grandchildren's lives, they must try to understand the needs of their grandchildren and make changes in their own thinking where possible. It is not necessary for grandparents to throw away their values in order to fit in. It is important, however, that they try to understand what their children and grandchildren are facing in the everyday world. To gain such understanding, new realities must be identified and explored:

Longer life. In 1935, when the Social Security Act was passed, a

child born that year was expected to live only 57 years. After World War II, changes in lifestyles and medical treatment have increased the likelihood that grandchildren will have their grandparents at least an additional 20 years. Baby Boomer grandparents (those born immediately after World War II) may well expect to dynamically expand the number of years of grandparent-grandchildren relationships. Think of the wisdom and life experiences these grandparents can share with the babies of their children. Family stories, legacies, and anecdotes which in previous generations might have been lost can now be passed on. Grandparents provide “history” and continuity. For example, most children rebel when their parents talk of “the good old days.” However, the same phrase coming from a grandparent carries more weight. After all, to a child, grandparents really are “old” and their past has more meaning. A child saw Tom Brokaw on television and turned and looked at this grandfather. He asked, “Gramps, did you fight in the Second World War?”

The grandfather answered, “Yes, see the pictures on the wall?”

“Gramps, tell me about it. What did you do? Were you a hero?”

This gave the grandfather an opportunity to explain that anyone can be a hero. He explained the meaning of the values that caused the soldiers to fight that war and what those values continue to mean in his life today.

New family types. The most familiar type of family is made up of husband-wife-children, with grandparents living nearby. However, this is no longer the norm in most communities. Following World War II a variety of family types have become more prominent, including single parent families; blended families as a result of divorce, death and remarriage; marriage of single parents with

children; never married families; and homosexual couples raising children. How many of these family types do you know of in your community? You may be surprised that most if not all these types are your neighbors. When you think of the stories in the Bible, how many family types can you name? As you read through this book, biblical family types are identified and biblical principles are used as the model for godly grandparenting.

Frequent family moves. Most families do not live their whole lives in one location. In many rural areas and small towns, there are not enough jobs available for children who grow up there. The average worker today changes jobs up to five times during his or her working years. Often this means moving the family from one part of the country to another and sometimes to another country in even another part of the world. This is especially true of a person who earns a college degree or receives specialized technical training.

Only a small percentage return to their home towns or to work in the family business. This reality is drawing attention to the importance of appreciating and strengthening family relationships. Technology is making it possible to maintain close contact, but distance is making it harder to have physical contact. Physical presence, however, is important to close family relationships and cannot be fully experienced with technological devices. Many grandparents are moving to new communities, near their children and grandchildren, in an attempt to maintain this close personal relationship.

Education throughout life. In the early years of the 20th century, earning a high school diploma was a goal achieved by only a few. Since the middle of the 20th century high school diplomas have become more common. Today, college graduation or receiving a technical training certificate is the important “rite of passage” that

at one time belonged to high school graduation. Older people are completing their high school education and pursuing college degrees in ever increasing numbers. Community colleges are offering more continuing education and adult education classes especially designed for people in their later years. Men and women in their middle and later years are attending specialized classes at these colleges to learn such things as carpentry, woodworking, art, music, computer usage, small engine repair, refrigeration, plumbing, etc. Some are earning graduate degrees and entering professions formerly populated by younger people. Almost every college in America can identify an increasing number of grandmothers and grandfathers among their students. Most major universities are making online courses and degrees available so that people do not necessarily have to leave home to get a college education. A significant number of grandparents are taking advantage of these new offerings.

“Farming out” family responsibilities. Traditionally, grandparents often served as the daycare providers for preschool children in the family. Then programs such as kindergarten and daycare centers took children out of their homes earlier. When the economy changed, it became necessary for both parents to work outside the home. In many cases families did not live near grandparents. Daycare and preschool programs became a necessity. Values education and survival skills became the business of schools, churches, synagogues and the media (via television and the Internet) instead of families.

Multiple jobs during the family history. Although the general population of Americans seems to have believed families with one wage earner was the ideal, in reality multiple wage earners were necessary to pay for the things most families felt they needed. It was

common for both father and mother to be employed full time, and teenage children to be gainfully employed part-time. Today, in a growing number of extended families, grandparents and even great-grandparents are employed as well. This situation limits the amount of time the family has together. A common problem can be seen in families where there are scheduling conflicts. For example, the husband works the evening shift and the wife works a day shift. Even on weekends family members may be pulled in different directions so that there is virtually no time for a shared meal or a time to sit together and talk.

Lawsuits. At the beginning of the 21st century, a teenager in Florida filed suit in family court to divorce his parents. This had never been done before in America. Often, when there is a death, divorce or remarriage, there are provisions involving children whereby grandparents are either neglected in the settlement or restricted from active involvement with their grandchildren. Sometimes in cases of abuse, chemical dependency, or neglect, grandparents file suit against adult children to take custody of and assume guardianship of their grandchildren (in some states the legal term is conservator). In another example, two adult children go to court to have a parent who needs 24/7 care placed in a nursing home. At the same time the grandchildren feel that the parents were being unfair and that grandmother could come live with them and that they would share in the responsibility of caring for her. The grandchildren filed suit in court to get a restraining order to keep their parents from having grandmother placed in a nursing home.

More housing choices. In the past, people preferred to “age in place”—in other words, in their own homes. Nowadays, many older people choose to downsize their homes or move into group

living centers where they experience what Faith Popcorn² calls “cocooning.” Older folks enjoy the communities’ advantages of guarded gates to protect them from the common dangers they used to face in their old neighborhoods. It was also commonly expected that older people would move in with one of their adult children. Some convert their garages into apartments for their older, semi-dependent parents. Others build a small house on the property near their homes where the older parent will have some privacy, but live nearby in case of an emergency. Many more affluent older people are moving into specially designed retirement communities. Sometimes, but not always, these communities are only a short driving distance from their children and grandchildren.

Better communication. Initially the mail service (now called “snail mail”) was the way grandparents maintained contact with their adult children and grandchildren wherever they lived. Then the telephone made immediate voice to voice contact possible. Now computers and the Internet make instant written, oral, and visual contact (via webcam) possible with children and grandchildren all over the world. Cell phones (including the new iPod telephone) with the capacity to connect to the Internet are becoming prolific whereby instant communication between family members and friends is possible.

Increased wellness. Americans as a whole are becoming more aware of the value of proper nutrition and exercise. As a result, they are living longer. Not only is there an explosive increase in the older population, they are healthier than older people of past generations. Now we see more grandparents and great-grandparents per child than ever before in history. Just as the children of Israel

2 Faith Popcorn, *The Popcorn Report* (New York: Doubleday, 1994).

were promised that they would see their children's children (Psalm 128:6), today's grandparents, because of their improved health, are just as likely to see their grandchildren on a regular basis. One product of increased wellness is a multiplying of generations at family reunions. In many family reunions there will be great-grandparents, grandparents, adult children, and children. In some families there are even great-great-grandparents who are still able to participate.

Recreation. Recreation is no longer totally home centered. Many family members seek recreational opportunities with organizations that charge membership fees or fees for services. Examples include the YMCA, arcades for computer games, recreation centers with outdoor race tracks, batting cages, and driving ranges. Many churches now provide recreational facilities they call "family life centers" for their members and often these are open to the community as well. Most of these include walking and jogging tracks, swimming pools, racquetball courts, basketball courts, exercise, and other activity rooms. Parties at local restaurants, etc., have replaced the kitchen table and back yard as the setting of choice. Often these styles of recreation have a tendency to segregate the family rather than bring them together. It can also be costly when grandparents feel they need to pay for all of their grandchildren's recreational activities. The positive benefit may be seen in the example of three generations of women (grandmother, mother, and granddaughter) who enrolled in a swimming class at the local community center. They reported that they not only felt healthier, but they had grown closer to each other as a result.

These changes are influencing the way grandparenting is being seen. Grandparents are now learning new ways of holding on to their beliefs while at the same time attempting to understand the dif-

ferent messages grandchildren are getting from television, movies, music and video games. Grandparents are trying to learn new ways of fitting into the lives of their adult children and grandchildren.

In light of these changes and the challenges grandparents face today, the word “career” may be more appropriate for discussing their lives. By definition, career implies a life work. In the appendix of this book you will find a chart identifying and describing unique characteristics of several career types of grandparenting.

Challenges Facing Grandparents in the 21st Century

In the following chapters of this book, we’ll discuss and illustrate a variety of grandparenting careers. With grandparenting it is obvious that “one size does not fit all.” Grandparents, therefore, have to choose which styles are best for them. Frequently we overhear grandparents speak about getting “stuck.” That is, they’ve decided that grandparenting is an important career for them, but their progress is not what they think it should be. For example, grandparents in blended families do not always get to see the grandchildren as often as they would like. This is often due to the increased number of grandparents in a blended family. It is good if a grandparent in this situation can view being stuck as temporary and move forward with other grandparents by planning for a way that all the grandparents will have time with the grandchildren and also provide a more complete support system for the grandchildren.

Single grandparents face other challenges, such as feeling like a third-wheel. This challenge may already be transforming into an opportunity as we see a majority of family members are choosing to be single. You no longer hear the single person being spoken of as unusual. Instead, single grandparents may enjoy easier travel due to

fewer responsibilities at home. It is not uncommon to see married grandparents reach out and invite the single grandparent to join them in celebrating various days and activities of the grandchildren.

Parenting grandchildren, at times, is seen as a burden rather than a blessing because of the added financial responsibilities and lifestyle changes. Yet we see more than 80 million children being raised by their grandparents and 200,000 of these by great-grandparents. Fortunately, there is an increasing number of support groups (both public and private) available for these grandparents and great-grandparents. Stories of grandparents raising grandchildren, once thought unusual, are now seen as typical in most communities. In Derrel's church, for example, a single grandmother raised two of her grandchildren and another couple raised four of their grandchildren and are currently raising one of their great-grandchildren.

Grandparenting college students is certainly a delight. Yet it may be filled with many challenges. A lot of college students may think of the grandparents as "money bags." A significant number of college students are partially or totally sponsored by their grandparents. However, grandchildren most often turn to their grandparents when challenges of one kind or another come up at the university. This may be true because grandparents are generally nonjudgmental and willing to listen. They are likely to respond rather than just react to a particular situation. This way of relating tends to increase the closeness between grandparents and grandchildren in college.

Great-grandparenting is one of the unexpected blessings of the 21st century. A majority of us can anticipate being great-grandparents. Your first response was probably, "I don't believe it." Well, more than 90% of grandparents living healthy lives today will be great-grandparents. Great-grandparenting is allowing us to stay

involved with grandparenting for a much longer time. You may not believe this but Ben, who is currently in his mid-sixties (so he says), can now brag about having two great-grandsons, to which he is often heard to exclaim: Wow! What a blessing!

“Surrogate grandparenting” may, to some, be a new term. However, this type of grandparenting has been around since the beginning of humanity. There has always been a neighbor, a teacher, a minister, or even a stranger that steps forward to assume responsibilities and privileges of grandparenting. In recent years several new organizations have sprung up to facilitate the connection between people who want to be surrogate grandparents and children who need a grandparent. One of the best examples is the Foster Grandparent Program. Foster Grandparents is a federal and state program designed to reach out to youngsters with mental challenges, physical challenges, and drug addiction. More than likely there is one in your community. This program was one of Nancy Reagan’s favorites. It is so popular that there is a waiting list of people who want to become foster grandparents.

“Grandparenting from a distance” is a phrase used to describe the fact that over half of grandparents do not live close to all of their grandchildren. Only a small percentage of grandparents live with their adult children and grandchildren. In other words, we have few if any “Walton families” left. Most of our grandchildren live some distance from us. For example, one of Ben’s grandchildren lives in the same metropolitan area as he, but there is more than fifty miles of city between them. Ben’s wife visits their other grandchildren who live in Canada more often than they are able to see the grandchildren who live in the same metropolitan area.

Conclusion

Grandparenting in a technology dominated world can be frightening and challenging. If grandparents remain connected to their adult children and grandchildren, life is not likely to be boring. Today's grandparents and great-grandparents have experienced more rapid, life altering changes than all generations in history. Change, therefore, is not new. How we manage changes and learn to use the technology are the key to accepting and successfully engaging in the new grandparenting careers. As you can see, everything in our grandparenting world is changing. Types of grandparenting and resources such as wireless Internet, digital cameras, text messaging, and iPods, have greatly affected the environment in which we live.

Regardless of our circumstances, we can be effective grandparents if we use the scriptures as our compass. We now live in a world that no longer subscribes to the absolutes of good and bad or right and wrong. The only source of truth that is unchanging yet applies to everyday life is biblical principles. There are some scripture passages you can claim that will help you to become a more effective role model, value carrier, and giver of unconditional love to your grandchildren. The scriptures we list are by no means exhaustive. The primary scripture we claim as our foundation is 2 Timothy 3:16-17. Notice in these verses that the scriptures are said to be our best resource to fully prepare us for our work. Another passage that can assure us of God's thinking about our importance as grandparents is Jeremiah 29:11. Jeremiah simply states that God has a plan for us filled with hope and meaning. Still another is Proverbs 3:5-6. These verses emphasize the importance of trusting and acknowledging the Lord's will and direction in our lives. These and others echo the sufficiency of the scriptures to be our guides in grandparenting.

Take time to read and study each. Follow this time with prayer and thanksgiving that we have as Christians. The exciting thing about being a grandparent in the 21st century can best be captured by the words of Emerson, “Do not go where the path may lead, but go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.” Likewise, as Browning says, “Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be...” We believe that is true as well.

Ten Guidelines for Grandparenting in Today’s World

1. Acknowledge the honor of being a grandparent.
2. Engage in fun activities and laugh a lot.
3. Explore the different expressions of love and practice them.
4. Build confidences through meaningful communication.
5. Keep confidences by respecting your grandchildren’s secrets.
6. Learn and utilize computers and other useful technology.
7. Share your values, including the importance of putting God first.
8. Model grace and forgiveness in your words and behavior.
9. Appreciate your family and its circumstances.
10. Be sensitive to your adult children and grandchildren’s schedule.

Prayer

Oh God, as the 119th Psalm says, “Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path...”. Please help me understand, as a grandparent, what I need to know in this complicated and often confusing day in which I live. Please help me know what my children and grandchildren need from me and what I am expected to do in each of my grandparenting careers. Give me wisdom and strength to be the grandparent my grandchildren need as they grow up in this fast changing new world. Amen.

