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Dear Parents of Young Children – A Young Child Looks At Grandparents
Michigan State University Extension Service
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Issued July 1965
2 pages

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Dear Parents of young children

A Young Child Looks At Grandparents

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE, MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

THE OTHER DAY I accepted the "very urgent" invitation of my little granddaughter to visit her kindergarten room. She informed me that it was Grandmother-Grandfather's Day. What a wonderful idea this seemed to me to single out grandparents in this very special way!

I was struck, however, with the small number of grandparents who attended in proportion to the number of children in the room. I fell to speculating why this was so and concluded that many of today's grandparents no longer live conveniently near their grandchildren. Others, no doubt, were working or were busy with volunteer work in the community. Whatever the reason, it serves to remind us that the role of grandparents not only has been changing but it has also become somewhat more obscure.

In the so-called "good old days" the family might have included one or more sets of grandparents, a maiden aunt, a stray cousin, or a helper in the home. Setting the table for eight or more people daily would no doubt dismay the average homemaker today. Besides, it would be impossible to fit such an array of relatives into a modern breakfast nook.

While recognizing some of the difficulties when several generations live together, there is much about such associations that we can envy and admire. A household of mixed membership does have much to offer a family. Grandparents, relatives, and others can add variety to the family scene and greatly enrich the daily experiences of little children.

All of this adds up to an important question—how do grandparents appear to little children? What is the

place of grandparents in today's family life?

Grandparents can enlarge the concept that a little child has of "My Family"

Despite recent increases in numbers of children born in families, the size of the American family is still small. Ordinarily, we think of family as mother, father, and the children. This places tremendous responsibility upon the parents to be all and do all that is necessary for the growth and development of children. While it is of first importance that little children be able to think of mother and father as their strongest support, to be able to widen the family group to include "my grandmother" or "my grandfather" builds a stronger picture of "my family" in the eyes of the child. It also adds to the number of persons the child feels he can trust. Thus it builds confidence and security in the child because of more family members that he feels belong to him.

Grandparents bestow love upon grandchildren

It comes as somewhat of a comfort to grandparents to hear that children need love and that they can not have too much of the right kind of love. This has always been and still is one of the important functions of grandparents—simply to enjoy their grandchildren, to listen to them, to be interested in them, and to love them as they are. Grandparents and grandchildren often have a greater amount of leisure time which can be shared. Thus grandparents may have more time to give to children all of the love and comfort they need or that parents may be unable to supply.

Grandparents function in a supporting role

While it is a privilege of grandparents to love their grandchildren, a problem can arise if they abuse this privilege. If they try to win grandchildren away from the parents or to usurp the rightful place of the parents in the affections of the child this can be very confusing to children.

This points to an unwritten law which can be very useful to grandparents—it is this: in the matter of affection, discipline, bestowing of gifts, etc., it is well for grandparents to act in a supporting role to the parents. This is not to belittle grandparents; they occupy a very special place but always in relation to the plan which the parents are trying to carry out with their children.

Grandparents who live their own lives and broaden their own interests are less likely to use their grandchildren to satisfy their own unfulfilled needs.

Grandparents, of course, can be helpful in a practical way

"What I need is a grandmother!" is the wail of many a young parent. The amount of time and energy which grandparents can devote to baby-sitting will vary with each individual. I notice some reluctance on the part of grandparents to admit that small children tire them. In a group of grandparents, however, this fact was admitted freely, particularly if the children were left for a very long period of time. It appears that the noise and confusion of living with little children is something that one must get used to all over again, but this is not always possible in a few hours or days.

This means that grandparents should feel free to state what they are willing to undertake in regard to sitting with the children without fear that it will be interpreted as not wanting to spend time with their grandchildren.

One word of caution—much as grandparents may want to be with their grandchildren and be able to enjoy them, they also enjoy the company of their own children. In the rush of dropping the grandchildren off and picking them up, it would help if occasionally the younger parents could take time to visit on an adult level with their older parents.

Grandparents can form a link between the past and present

So much has been said about the tiresome reminiscences and comparisons that older people often indulge in that many of today's grandparents hesitate to talk about the past. By so doing, they often deprive children of a very rich source of information and delight. "Please tell me about the olden days when you were young," is a frequent wish of children. Stories of grandmother's youth or of stories she may have heard can be a source of real pleasure to children. It can give genuine and personal meaning to the past that they are likely to gain in no other way.

Association with grandparents can give children a picture of what older people are like and what older age is like

It behooves us then as grandparents to be the kind that little children can admire and respect. Since one can no longer demand respect as an older person, it must be deserved. This means giving more thought to the qualities in older age that others can admire.

Younger parents, too, help to create this picture of older age. If they are out of sorts with their parents, if they allow older parents to upset them and become critical of them, this disturbs the grandparent relationship. Children need to carry with them a picture of older people free of fault-finding, dread, and misunderstanding. In this way they can think of older age as a period that can be rich and fruitful which has much to contribute to living.

So much depends upon the kind of grandparents one is talking about. We know there are grandparents who are progressive, active, and up-to-date. These grandparents are open-minded as to some of the newer methods of rearing children. They are ready with advice when asked, but do not impose it. There are other grandparents who remain rigid and are unwilling to con-

sider any methods of rearing children except the old ones. Failing health may also prevent some from being the kind of grandparents they would like to be.

It depends also on where grandparents live. If they live with the younger parents, definite rules worked out ahead of time are more apt to make living together run more smoothly. If they live near their children so that the grandchildren spend more time with them or if they care for the grandchildren while the parents work, the grandparents may have to use more of their own methods in dealing with the children. In any case it would seem reasonable for both sets of parents to come to some kind of understanding so that the children would experience a more or less united front. Differences are bound to exist and some such exposure can even be healthy for children.

If the grandparents live some distance away, keeping in touch with the grandchildren presents a special problem. In order to stay in the picture as a grandparent it is necessary to take advantage of mechanical contacts, at least between visits. Being very punctual in remembering birthdays and special days, sending a special greeting occasionally will do much to keep

the grandparent relationship vital. One grandmother states that she always adds a postscript especially for



her granddaughter when sending a letter to the mother.

This letter has suggested that:

Today's grandparents have much to contribute to the Social World of Little Children.

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FUN OUTDOORS

During the summer months when children spend more time out of doors, their play should contribute to every phase of their development; and above all, it should be fun.

In addition to some of the permanent equipment which you may provide such as sand box, swing sets, or wheel toys, little children will enjoy:

A PLACE TO DIG—A corner of the garden that they can call their own will give them a place where they can dig in the soil, fill a dump-truck or perhaps plant a seed or two. "To make the garden grow in a hurry," older pre-schoolers might cut out small colored paper circles and insert small branches through their centers. Mount the sticks in the soil to hold the flowers upright.

WATER PLAY—Children love to slosh around in the water either in a container that you buy or a tub that you bring out from the house. Provide several containers to use for pouring. Cut amusing shapes from bright colored sponges. Let these unusual looking fish float in the water.

A PARADE OR A TRAIN—Dolls or stuffed toys can be pushed in cabs, make-believe characters can be secured on slabs of wood and tied behind tricycles or wagons. A suggestion or two from you will help them to add to the procession.

Outdoor play can be noisy and active, it can also be quiet and imaginative.

Cooperative extension work in agriculture and home economics. Michigan State University and the U. S. Department of Agriculture cooperating. N. P. Ralston, Director, Cooperative Extension Service, Michigan State University, East Lansing. Printed and distributed under Acts of Congress, May 9 and June 30, 1914.