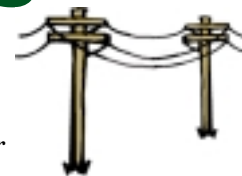
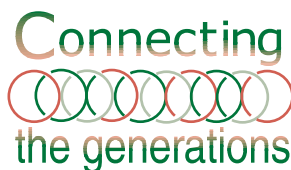


Grandparenting *from a* Distance



C. Corson, K. DeHart, S. Bowman, and A.J. Walker

Some grandparents whose grandchildren live far away are concerned that they might be missing out on their grandchildren's everyday lives and special experiences. But living far apart doesn't mean you can't be close emotionally. Long-distance grandparenting is a challenge, yet with careful planning, you can be in touch with your grandchildren and involved in their daily lives.



the map of their city where, for example, they go to school, play soccer, and take piano lessons.

Connect with your grandchild's parents to make sure they know and approve of your plans and activities. You don't want your communication with grandchildren to upset their parents.

Staying in touch

Frequent, regular contact is the key to building and maintaining a relationship with grandchildren. Here are a few points to remember.

Know what's going on in your grandchildren's lives—what they like, what they don't like, their activities, the television programs they watch, the music they listen to. Ask them questions about their interests, but be prepared not to be thrilled about everything they are doing. It is important to listen and learn, to discuss but not to judge.

Set a pattern of regular contact so your grandchildren will know what to expect. It's nice to surprise them occasionally, but your consistency lets them know you are committed to being in their lives. You might send them a calendar marked with dates when you will call or send letters, send care packages, and so on. Be sure to let them know what happened if you were not able to follow through as promised. You don't want them to be disappointed.

Buy a map of the United States, a map of your city, and a map of your grandchild's city. On the U.S. map, mark your state and town, and your grandchildren's state and town. Mark the city map with colored dots to show where you spend time, such as work, church, the park, and so on. Send the maps to your grandchildren. Ask them to mark on

Through the mail

Getting a letter in the mail can be exciting for a child. With a little attention, your letters and cards can be unique, giving your grandchildren a tangible connection to you. Here are some ideas.

Send stationery to your grandchild; use a different but matching pattern for your letters. Tell her, "I use this stationery just to write to you!" and use it only for that purpose. This will make her feel special.

Send preaddressed labels and postage stamps and ask that your grandchild use them to write to you, to send a comic strip from the newspaper, to send a school paper he is proud of, or to tell you a joke he just heard.

Ask your grandchildren to send you postcards or programs describing their activities. For example, they might make a drawing of their trip to a park, send a program from a special event, or send a brochure from a visit to a local museum. Similarly, you can send them programs or brochures describing your activities.

Write your life story or a story from your childhood and send it to your grandchildren. Have them send you a story, too.

Corinne Corson, research assistant, Human Development and Family Sciences and Extension Family and Community Development, Oregon State University; Kimberly DeHart, program director, South Central Michigan Chapter, Alzheimer's Association, Ann Arbor, MI; Sally Bowman, Extension family and community development specialist, Oregon State University; Alexis J. Walker, professor of human development and family sciences, Oregon State University.



Ask questions that prompt a response; for example, what do they think about a current event, a recent movie, or a mythical figure such as Sasquatch?

Let your grandchildren know what a typical day is like for you. It's okay to talk about the extraordinary events and thoughts in your life, but let them know also about the simple, everyday things. Ask them to tell you about a typical day in their lives, too.

Publish a family newsletter and send it to your grandchildren. Sprinkle letters and postcards with odd facts or bits of trivia related to their birth, their parent's childhood, or a family ancestor.

Send flowers, write a poem, send a telegram. Send old pictures of you and of your grandchild's parents.

Tell them your philosophy of life and ask about theirs. Remember not to be judgmental in response.

Send care packages with edible gifts. First, though, check with their parents to be sure that your food choices are acceptable.

Use a photo as a postcard. Send a photo of yourself in a nice frame and ask them to keep it in their bedroom where they can see you every day.

Send cards, postcards, and newspaper and magazine clippings. Send items that reflect the seasons, such as a beautiful leaf, a pressed spring flower, or seeds from your garden.

Send simple gifts that reflect the child's current interests—ballet tights, a dinosaur puzzle, or a book about horses or baseball, for example.

Write a book with your grandchild as the main character or tell a simple story, perhaps about something you would like to do together. Illustrate the book or story with simple drawings or photos of you or your grandchild.

Exchange books. Know what your grandchildren like to read and let them know what you like. Read the same book and then "talk" about it in a letter, during a phone call, or over the Internet.

Phone calls

One of the most convenient ways to stay in touch long distance is by telephone. Plan your calls carefully so you can take advantage of your time together

on the phone, both in terms of scheduling and of making telephone calls meaningful.

Decide how much you want to spend on long-distance calls. For instance, may grandchildren call collect? Will you call every week, every 2 weeks, every month? Use a timer, or have your grandchild use one, to stay within your limits.

Agree on a day and time for your next phone call. Consider when they will be at home and available, and don't forget about your own schedule.

Communication in a technological age

Modern technology can help make you a part of your grandchild's life. Some of the ideas here can be carried out very quickly, but others take a considerable investment of time and energy, which might not be possible for grandparents who are employed or whose health is not the best. Do what works best for you and your grandchild.

Read a story to your young grandchild on audiotape or videotape. Exchange voice letters through audiotapes or videotapes.

Videotape some of the places you go and things you do, then send the tapes to your grandchild. Pay attention to length, however. Don't expect a preschooler to watch a 30-minute videotape or listen to a 30-minute audiotape.

Record your life history, providing a legacy for your children and grandchildren. Record places the grandchildren visited when they were at your house.

Record where grandchildren might visit during their next trip to your home. Then ask "Where would you like to visit most?" or "What did you like best about what you saw?"

Computers with modems, available at public libraries, make it possible to send letters electronically, through e-mail. You might use e-mail to plan an upcoming visit. This will give you each something to look forward to when you actually get together.

Some computer programs allow two people to send and receive messages at the same time—in "real time," in computer jargon. In real time, you can help with homework or play games. It is much like talking on the telephone but uses written instead of spoken words.



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