



# Grandparents *Raising* Grandchildren

  
THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA  
COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

## Helping Grandchildren Stay in Contact with Parents

***Taking on the responsibility of raising grandchildren is not easy, but it also may not be easy for the parent to give up that responsibility.*** Visits with their parents may help your grandchildren adjust to the changes in their lives. But every family is different. Visits may be helpful in some cases, but may cause stress in others. You and the children's parents need to decide how to best handle the visits. For visits to go well, both you and the parent have to be flexible and patient. Accepting that the children love you both is essential. Here are some guidelines to help your grandchildren maintain a relationship with their parents.

### A Visit from a Parent

When a parent visits a child who is being reared by the grandparent, roles are reversed. Grandparents have now assumed the job of primary caregiver. They are responsible for making daily decisions regarding the child's life.

Because the child needs the support of loving adults, grandparents and parents should agree to support each other and do what is best for the child. It is necessary to accept reality and not be jealous when children express attachment and love to one or the other. Both relationships are important for the child's healthy development.

A visit from a parent may bring up many different feelings for grandparents as well. At various times you may feel happy, sad, angry, resentful, or worried. It is important to recognize and deal with your own feelings before the visit happens. Spend some time asking yourself, "How am I feeling about this visit? Glad? Mad? Sad? Fearful?" Come up with some constructive ways of handling those feelings. Write in a journal. Talk to a partner or trusted friend. But be cautious



about what you share with your grandchild. Remember that the person you're upset with is still the child's parent. Your grandchild will take many of her cues from you when interacting with her parent.



### Tips for Smooth Visitations

Visits can be stressful time for everyone. Here are some ways you can help visits from parents go smoothly.

- **Be as flexible as possible with schedules.** Talk about where the visits will happen and who's responsible for transporting the child. Give the parent notice of changes in your schedule or your grandchild's schedule. Give advance notice of vacations that you and your grandchild will be taking.
- **Treat your grandchild's parent with respect.** Be on time. Don't discuss problems you have with the parent in front of the child. Don't use children to relay messages to the parent.
- **Maintain open communication lines with your grandchild's parent.** Discuss any rules and discipline so you can be consistent. Let the parent know

what their child is doing in school and with friends. Share current addresses, home and work phone numbers.

- **Don't question your grandchild's loyalty.** Don't make children feel guilty about enjoying the time they spend with their parent. Help children feel safe and comfortable with both of you. Understand that children need love from you and her parent. Wanting to spend time with a parent doesn't mean they care for you any less.
- **Make visitation a normal part of life.** Talk about the visit before it happens, especially with young children. Help your grandchild and her parent decide on something fun to do during the visit.



### Keeping Discipline Consistent

Children are most likely to cooperate when their rules and limits are consistent. When



parents and grandparents enforce different rules, children don't know what to expect. It is important to communicate with your grandchildren's parent about discipline. If you are a full-time caregiver, you may need to share your rules and limits with the child's parent before the visit. Try to agree on some basic rules that the parent will also enforce. Keep in mind what is in the child's best interest.

Rules should be enforced consistently, both when the child is at your home and when she is with her parent. Children need to understand that you love and care for them, but there are rules that they are expected to follow and consequences for breaking those rules. Children need clear expectations so they know how to behave, and limits help them know what to expect. Some children misbehave just to force you to set limits on their behavior.

When a parent first begins visiting a child, he or she may let children break the rules. Disciplining the child may be too difficult, or the parent may want the child to have fun during their time together. But being lax with discipline will only lead to more misbehavior later. During times of stress, children need a stable and predictable world. Although some children may misbehave more when under stress, discovering that the rules have not changed comforts them and helps them feel safe. Encourage the parent to set reasonable limits and enforce them from the very first visit. For more information please refer to *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: Disciplining Your Grandchild*.

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### Helping Children Cope with Stress

A visit from a parent can be stressful for a child living with grandparents. Children who have not seen their parents for a while may be unsure about how they will get along, or may feel ambivalent about seeing the parent. Children feeling stress may complain of stomachaches, be nervous, have trouble sleeping, and get more infections. But you can help children cope with the stress caused by a parent's visit.

#### ■ Identify what is causing the stress.

Children may think the parent doesn't love them anymore. Older children may worry that they won't have anything to talk about. Help children understand that their parent does still love them. It may be helpful to explain to the children why they are living with you.





- **Give the child some control over the visit.** Let children make choices within the limits. For example, they may want to choose whether the visit takes place on Saturday or Sunday. Older children may want to help decide where the visit will take place. Help your grandchild come up with things they can talk about with their parent such as school activities, sports, or hobbies.
- **Make plans in advance.** Mark the visit on a calendar so younger children have a concrete idea of when it is happening. Discuss the visit in a positive way before it actually happens so that children are prepared. Let your grandchildren know that they can talk to you about the visit. Be supportive.



### When a Parent Doesn't Show Up

You and your grandchild have been thinking about the visit all week. You've talked about the fun things they are going to do

with their parent — and then the parent doesn't show up. What do you do now?

Although it may be tempting to say mean things about the parent in front of the child, that won't help the child. If you are really upset, call a friend to talk about your feelings. Explain to your grandchild what may have happened. Don't lie, but keep your explanations simple. Call the parent to find out why he or she didn't come — there might be an explanation like car trouble or an emergency.

If there is no reason, you may have to explain that to the child. Your explanations will vary based on the age of the child. A 4-year-old won't understand as much as a 15-year-old. For young children, you might say something like "Sometimes, your mom doesn't do what she says she is going to. I know you're upset and I'm sad, too."

If the child seems upset, encourage him to express his feelings. You can comfort the child by saying "That must have made you feel angry and disappointed." Try to point out ways the parent has shown that she cares, such as calling or sending cards.

You might also encourage the child to talk to the parent about his disappointment. Explain to the child that the parent may not know that he is upset unless he says so.

### When a Parent Can't Visit

For some children, parental visits never happen. In some cases, laws determine whether parents can visit and what restrictions are placed on the visit. Parents may not be able to visit at all if they have abused

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the child or are in prison. Your grandchild may ask why he doesn't get to see his mom. Being honest with the child is usually best, but what you tell her depends on her age.

Young children cannot understand complicated issues, so tell them only what they need to know. Children might be told that their parent is in jail, but they don't need to know all the details. If it is appropriate, make sure the children know that the parent still loves them but remember it won't help if you lie to them. Children always need to know that they are not to blame for parent's actions.

There are other ways to help children stay in contact with their parents if they can't see them. Children might send letters or pictures to their parents. They may want to draw pictures. Telephone calls may also be an appropriate way to keep in touch. In some cases, such as when a parent is abusive or has a substance addiction, staying

in contact is not in the child's best interests. Let children know why they can't see or talk to the parent. Help them deal with their feelings, and know that children feel grief when they lose contact with a parent. If the child has trouble dealing with the loss of contact, professional counseling may help her learn how to adjust.

### In Summary

Although it may seem like a lot of trouble, maintaining the connection between your grandchild and his parents is important. Encourage parent-child visits whenever they are appropriate, and work with the parent. If the parent cannot visit, help your grandchild understand why. Help adjust to this change in his life by being there, listening to feelings, and letting him know you love him.



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Developed and released by Dr. Diane Bales, Human Development Specialist, Cooperative Extension, The University of Georgia. The Grandparents Raising Grandchildren series was adapted, with permission, from the Grandparents as Parents series originally developed by the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension and released by Sam Quick. For more information, go to <http://www.gafamilies.org> or call 1-800-ASK-UGA1.



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Publication # CHFD-E 59-2

revised July, 2009