

Grandparenting revisited



THE DOCTOR IS IN
DR. BATYA L. LUDMAN

I never would have believed that we could have reached maximum potential occupancy in our apartment, but over the holidays we managed to have 14 people – eight adults and six children under the age of six, including a newborn and a four-month-old – sharing our space, day and night.

As the last children get ready to depart, after we washed more dishes and laundry than we could have imagined, topped only by the amount of food consumed and breast milk offered, we are all tired but happy. Not only do I like knowing all my birdies are in the nest – which, given the distance, happens at best one to two times a year – but it's wonderful to see the children and grandchildren not just getting along but actually enjoying one another.



MAKE DATES with your grandchildren. (Illustrative; Edi Israel/Flash90)

IT'S TOUGH to be a grandparent these days, but the opportunity to cuddle the little ones and make time to simply “be” with the older ones can be incredibly rewarding.

How does one achieve this? Here are some tips for trying to be the best *savtie* and *zaydie* on the block.

1. Love your grandchildren as much and as often as you can. You have so much to offer that your grandchildren cannot get from anyone else. Don't be afraid to offer lots of hugs and kisses and to actually tell them how much you love them. They never tire of hearing it.

2. Get down on the floor and play with the kids or sit around the table together, and you'll be amazed at how much fun you can have. Our 35-year-old doll house and a set of magnetic tiles were great for almost every age and gave us wonderful insight into the kids' creative and imaginary world. Your children and grandchildren and even you can not only love but also fully benefit from this very special kind of individual attention that you can bestow. There is nothing as special as the wonderful bond that you can create with them.

3. Your time, energy and less hectic schedule, compared to that of your own children, is a real gift for all to appreciate. Remember, you are one of the few people who won't say you are too busy when they just want to play or talk. That is worth so much to them.

4. Feed your grandchildren – lots of food. Do you remember the amazing aromas wafting from your *bubbe's* kitchen at all hours of the day or night? Children form very intense relationships to food, based on their aromas, the context in which they are offered, and the wonderful memories that become associated with them.

The special foods associated with each holiday can bring a smile to a child of any age, especially if you let them help you in the process. They not only love to assist, but there is something for everyone to do. Our younger grandchildren love to pick out the napkins and help set the table while the older ones help in the kitchen.

5. Feed your grandchildren more... stories, lots of personal stories. Give them details, lots and lots of details about what life was like when you were young. What were the holidays like when you were growing up? What sorts of things did you do when you were their age?

Don't leave out the stories about their parents. What funny things used to happen to them? They will love to hear how mischievous they were.

6. Have dates with each of your grandchildren. The opportunities for meaningful one-on-one time are endless. Give them a choice of two activities or let them surprise you with their choice of an activity you can do together. It need not be exotic but simply something fun of their choosing. Whether you go for a walk, shoot some baskets, play a game, make a craft, create a vegetable garden, grab a snack for the park, or act as their tutor and help out with homework, there is something you both can enjoy together.

Ask them for help with technology, and they will give you endless but excellent guidance, while you educate them on the importance of being patient with others!

7. Make projects for and with the grandchildren. Children of all ages love books. Young children can have theme books such as “B” is for Ben, blue, banana, and

other fun words with pictures. You can make a book of fun places to visit, memories, a collage of family photos, beloved stories and any other treasures that children can help put together. Older children can interview you and help write your autobiography. There are endless possibilities.

8. Learn when to speak and when to remain quiet. While you, as a grandparent, may have lots of experience, your own children may not ask for or want your opinion. It can be so hard to stand by when you think or know that they are making a mistake.

Perhaps an open conversation where you actually ask them when and if they might value your thoughts and advice can open the door for noncritical discussion. Your children need to let you know just what their expectations are for your involvement in their lives, and you need to share with them your feelings about your role. It is crucial to keep those lines of communication open, but not always easy. Sometimes you may need a third party to help out just a bit to ensure

that everyone can be heard. At the end of the day, the final decision is that of your children to make.

9. Spoil your grandchildren in all kinds of acceptable ways. Make sure, ahead of time, that Mom and Dad would approve of a special food treat, a new toy, a date or other treasure. It is important, too, to make certain that your goals and those of the parents don't conflict, and that you don't inadvertently undermine a punishment. Once you have their approval, there is nothing quite as meaningful as a special little something from *Saba* and *Savta*.

I know of one woman who reads to her grandchildren in America every day while they're eating breakfast. It not only frees up the parents to attend to the younger children, but it is one-on-one time that everyone treasures. Another friend takes each child out to their favorite restaurant on their birthday or other special occasion. They have done this since the children were young, but now in their teens and twenties the children still look forward to their special time alone with their grandparents.

10. Be with your grandchildren where they are at. Don't feel rejected or insulted if your grandchild is too busy to get together. Often, we think that they just don't want to spend time with us, whereas if we let them suggest an alternative plan, both of you can have meaningful time together. Remember, a long school week does not allow for much downtime, so you may be competing with other activities.

While kids are often not into chatting on the phone, many will be happy to respond to your text message. This may allow you to engage them in a short conversation about what the best part of their week was, how the latest soccer game, dance class or *chug* was, and hear about their day in general. You may be able to engage them in a specific topic or even learn something fun together.

You don't really need a reason to call, especially if you do so on a regular basis and keep the calls short. Many families encourage making a pre-Shabbat phone call and blessing your grandchildren and children alike while also suggesting something you are proud of them for. It is a great way to end the week. Visits and sleepovers are always fun, and you can plan together.

ALAS, IT'S been days since we used our washing machine non-stop, the toys are all put back where they belong, the apartment has been swept free of all the sand, and while we look forward to a quiet day or two, we anxiously await the pitter-patter of both big and little feet again.

Good grandparents are very hard to find, and your grandchildren need you around for a long time. There are lots of stories still untold. ■

The writer is a licensed clinical psychologist in private practice in Ra'anana and author of Life's Journey: Exploring Relationships – Resolving Conflicts. She has written about psychology in The Jerusalem Post since 2000. ludman@netvision.net.il; www.drbatyaludman.com

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