

## **Grandparents – are we so different? By Sheila Steptoe**

We come in all shapes and sizes. We may have short hair, or long, full head or bald and some with big cuddly stomachs. Big busts, little busts, some droop, some pert, what does it matter? We may be in our 30's, 40's or 50's, wear mini skirts, have grey hair and be a huge embarrassment to our own children. We can be independent interesting people, still living life to the full. Yes, we may be getting a few wrinkles but we call them laughter lines. Some may put their teeth in a glass by the bed at night time, but we are presentable and put them in during the day. We are not all old, senile, wrinkly miserable people as some may like to believe, but some can be. Some were hippies in their youth and have never grown up themselves, and inside they still feel 20 at whatever age they may be. We can now laugh at the little things in life, be interesting and a lot of fun to have around. We can play, treat our grandchildren, and we often spend our wages or pensions on them, so we can be useful.

We can be scared of the thought of growing old when our children say to us – you are about to become a grandparent. We may feel that this is another responsibility we have to take on, or can we hand it over to our children? Are they ready for this? In our eyes, our own children are still our little ones so how can they be old enough to have children of their own? They maybe in their 20's, 30's or even younger or older but they are still our babies. Yes, they may hold down a responsible job, doing adult things, but this is different! All these questions and many more maybe running through our heads but it is normal to feel this way. This is a big responsibility taking care for another human being, a child, are they ready to cope?

Are they ready to have sleepless nights, have their clothes smelling of sick, or their make-up ruined when they experiment with it and are we ready to take this on again? Their nicely ordered homes and their lives maybe all about to change and ours, can they adjust to this and can we? Tools in the shed that has taken years to save up for, and stacked nicely in order, are they going to be lost or ruined? How much is this all going to cost – prams, high chairs etc? Can they afford it, do they realise the commitment and sacrifices that may come when providing for a child, and do we as grandparents? Where are these going to come from, do we pay or our children and where we will put them in our neatly ordered house? So many thoughts run through our heads, along with the excitement of the impending arrival. Some grandparents may not realise when those words are said to them, is the amount of joy of having a grandchild to spoil and cuddle, which is a pleasure in itself, is they will have more pleasure from the experience that they will ever imagine.

Pregnancy over and the baby suddenly arrives. Everything changes and the emotions run high. Suddenly you want to share your joy with the world. This helpless little beautiful baby needs you and all the family to survive. When you had your own children you were tired after the experience, this is completely different, you have the gift without the pain. Happy chatter as to who the baby looks like, of course it is from your side of the family! If a son is now a father, it is different to if it is a daughter who is now the mother. Will you be needed in the same way? But who cares, this is a whole new experience.

The fun bit is over and reality sets in. The bond seems to come naturally to most. Others it may take longer because their circumstances may not be amicable with both the parents. In-laws, son-in-laws and daughter-in-laws relationships are not always easy. Getting to know someone takes time and sometimes there is resentment for what ever reason. Others gel straight away and welcome a new addition to the family. Some grandparents will be sharing their grandchild with a single parent so there is no partner, but what ever the circumstance is, this little bundle of joy will be an individual person right from the day he or she is born.

Some grandparents will be around to share the upbringing of the child; other grandparents are leading very independent lives so will have to adjust. Grandparent's role is very different today as to when they had their own grandparents. In those days, not many grandmothers went out to work as the role within the family was for the father to go out to work, and the mother to stay at home to look after the children. Therefore the grandchildren seemed a natural extension. More and more grandparents today are working and they are leading a much more independent life, or they may have a brilliant social life, may have built a career so therefore are not around 24/7. But they can play just an important role but in a different way.

They have often learnt a lot through their own lives so can pass their knowledge on to the younger generation. Grandparents are often a lot less stressed and a lot of the little discipline rules are not so important to them. Some parents feel their have sole responsibility to take care of their children, but grandparents can help. They may not have been perfect parents themselves, as there is no right or wrong way to parent, but they learnt from their own parents and their upbringing, as will their children. They will pass down their own standards, expectations and discipline as their parents did.

Time for the occasional spoiling, because when a grandparent spends time with their grandchild, they will usually have done all the little chores at home so will be more relaxed. Or, they will have arranged a special time to see their grandchildren and they block the time out in their diaries and that time is a precious time for just the two of them. They may make the time for a special treat and take them somewhere, or play solely with them, because they have the time. Often parents can then have time to themselves.

The grandchild grows. Can they keep up with the latest technology that their grandchildren have? Why, some are loving every moment and their grandchildren have the pleasure of teaching them and it is a great time that they can spend together. It can be a great way to communicate if distance is a problem and they can't see one another as often as they would like. With MSN and such, they can 'chat' and tell each other things which they may not be able to tell their own parents. Often, grandparents are the ones that the grandchildren can tell all their secrets, and this creates a special bond. Other times, grandparents can teach their grandchild something special as they often have more patience than when they were a parent. As grandparents grow older, patience is one of the things that they learn so grandchildren can often benefit.

Sometimes when a grandparent was a parent, they did not have the time or money to do special treats, and they may now be in a better financial position to take a child on holiday, to a theme park, to London to see the sights, or whatever interests they may have. This can be an extra treat, and are often remembered in a different special way, when it was just them and granny or granddad.

Gosh, being a grandparent can be tiring. They don't have as much energy as they used to have! They can't run as fast as they used to either, so playing football makes them puff. Their knees seem to creek with so much bending down as well. Sometimes after having a grandchild or grandchildren for the weekend, they collapse the next day so parents have to remember that sometimes they can not keep up. As for the latest trends that the children want and like, or the music they play, can give them a headache and they won't always understand why they like something!

Nanny's high heel shoes may have been replaced with flat shoes now but they are now fashionable fortunately, but some did wear platform shoes in their youth. Slippers become the norm along with a dressing gown, but most grandparents draw the line with elasticated waistbands – until they need them.

But hopefully a grandchild will respect a grandparent. Respect seems to have eluded some children and their elders are a bore. Some can be, but if a grandchild has their involvement in their life, they may be pleasantly surprised to learn that they were children once, and they got up to all sorts of things as well. They were told off by their own parents, they may have been naughty at school, and they went through a period when they felt that their own parents did not understand them as well. Then they become human and normal, and everyone can laugh together about all the silly little things in life that we all get frustrated with. Even if they do have wrinkles, can't dance on the dance floor as the grandchildren do, but at least they try or hopefully most grandparents do. Usually grandchildren don't see these things like adults do! They just accept nanny or granddad just as they are. They may not understand all the trends that the younger generation has or likes, but they had their own boundaries to cross with their own parents so they do understand! They may not be the same, and as grandparents they have to understand this, but they also have to learn to keep quiet sometimes! Oh this can be so hard and frustrating but if they want to build a good relationship with their own children, so that they can see their grandchildren, then they have to hand the responsibility over to them. They have to trust that their children will bring up our grandchildren in the way that is right for them, even if some don't agree with a lot of 'the differences in the generation gap'. Even if grandparents do not agree with all the things that happen, rules set down, no rules at all, the role of parents is now over to them, and a grandparent's role is just to enjoy.

Enjoy every moment, love every minute but grandparents still need to do their own things. This needs to be explained to our children. Grandparents have their own lives to lead, their own interests, their own quirky little habits which some how have crept up on them, and their own silly likes and dislikes, but they are allowed to have them as they are growing old disgracefully hopefully and enjoying every moment. If some grandparents

are not doing that, then perhaps they should because life is too short to be grumpy old people. Grandparents may be their grandchildren's inspiration – who knows but our grandchildren are our future.

Some helpful tips on how three generations can enjoy each other:

Respect each other – we all come from different generations

Listen carefully to others needs and ideas

Watch and learn from each other

Ask with kindness

Share meals together

Help each other willingly

Have separate times away from each other

Encourage that person to be an individual

Praise each other often

Congratulate each other

Tell each other those three little words – they can not read your minds

Look after each other when illness strikes

Never shout at each other if they don't understand

Be patient

Make that phone call – it can make such a difference

All have hobbies – some individual, some you can share

Share your problems

Be a family unit

But most of all

TALK and listen to each other properly

By

Sheila Steptoe – Author of Before I Get Old and Wrinkly

Aspirations4u.com

01245 361274