



by Karen Stephens

What Makes a Grandparent? From the Mouths of Babes

The teachers in our child care program were curious. Just what did our preschoolers think it meant to be a grandparent?

To find out, they went to the most reliable source on the issue, the kids themselves. With 15 children, aged 3-5 years, the teachers conducted a group discussion by asking children to complete two phrases: "A grandmother is someone who . . ." and "A grandfather is someone who . . ."

As each child contributed, the teachers wrote down their ideas. Their comments let us see what impresses young children most about grandparents. I find the view charming, revealing, touching and, at times, sadly poignant.

Their comments follow. To tickle the grandparents in your child's life, ask your kids to supply more responses. Write their comments down and share them with gram and gramps. They will be appreciated.

A grandmother is someone who . . .

- takes care of moms
- loves
- protects you
- puts you in a chair because you get into something
- is old and wrinkly
- dies
- calls me on the phone a bunch of times
- gets something for you if you are good
- plays with you
- likes puppy dogs
- puts Band-aids™ on you
- helps me fix an ice cream cone
- goes to Disneyland™
- washes the dishes and stuff
- lets me bring Mickey (the dog) in the van with us
- lives in California and works in California
- buys you a hot dog
- helps me read a book and play a game and wash the dishes and cook and helps me draw pictures

A grandfather is someone who . . .

- works at carpet cleaning
- works at the tavern
- goes to Disneyland™
- lets me help fix the sink
- lets me clean the dishes with him
- lets me wash the car with him
- lets me water and plant flowers
- takes me on his motorcycle
- loves you

“Grandparents
interact;
they don't
just sit back
and watch
grandkids
perform.”

- can do projects with me
- works with you
- looks fun when they don't have wrinkles
- is fun to play with
- makes pictures with you
- gives you candy
- walks with me to the park
- looks like he is old because he is bigger

So there you have it; a small group of children with a broad array of impressions about gram and gramps. As I read them, themes emerged. I think of them as grandparents' gifts to children.

The Gift of Love

It's more than clear, children feel loved by their grandparents. From playing together to making efforts to telephone frequently, grandparents get the message through. What a wonderful way to develop kids' self worth — and great for self esteem, too!

The Gift of Time

Did you notice how often the children focused on how they spend time with grandparents? The frequently used phrase "with me" is revealing. Grandparents interact; they don't just sit back and watch grandkids perform. Grandparents are actively engaged with kids, spending time with them doing the simple things kids like to do — walking to the park, making an ice cream cone, or drawing a picture.

The Gift of Patience

"Lets me" peppered the kids' list. Grandparents teach children basic living skills — from fixing a sink to watering flowers. Patiently allowing children — in small, incremental steps — to help out around the house helps them develop a good work ethic and independence. As parents allow grandkids to help out in the family, children gain a self of belonging among loved ones. As kids contribute, they learn to be cooperative and responsible.

The Gift of Enjoying Life

No doubt about it, kids think grandparents are fun folks to hang out with! From puppy dogs to hot dogs, from the car wash to Disneyland, grandparents show kids a good time. They encourage children to enjoy life to the max, especially the simplest of pleasures like savoring an ice cream cone or washing dishes together.

The Gift of Protection

Motorcycle rides with grandpa aside, (yes, that one gave me a shudder, too!) kids realize grandparents want to keep them safe and sound. From sticking on Band-Aids™ to moving kids from harm's way, grandparents make kids feel secure and protected. Can kids help but feel cherished?

In the smallest of ways, grandparents show children how important they are and how very much they are valued. Grandparents' tiny, tender, tireless actions speak volumes to children. It's good to know the kids are listening.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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