

It's Granny, not nanny: Childcare drudgery seems to have taken over from fun family invitations and caring phone calls for many of today's grandparents

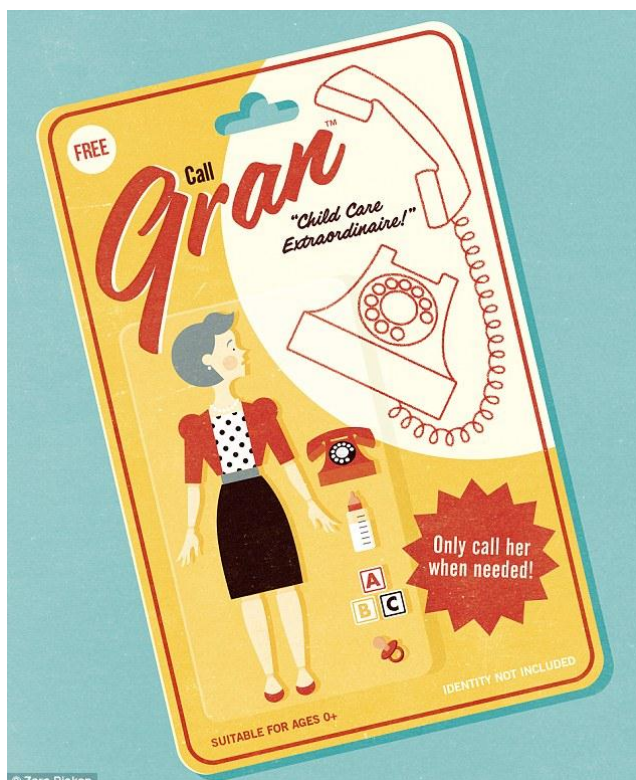
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Childcare drudgery seems to have taken over from fun family invitations and caring phone calls for many of today's grandparents. So when did we start treating our parents as unpaid staff rather than as valued relatives?

Sandra doesn't have a problem with her grandchildren – in fact, she adores them and is happy to look after the two preschoolers when their regular childcare has fallen through.

But the 65-year-old retired retail manager does have a problem – and it's with her son, her grandchildren's father. 'He only calls when I'm needed,' she says. "Hi, Mum, are you free tomorrow..?" When I arrive, he has left for work, and he's not back by the time my daughter-in-law comes home and I leave. He'll never call afterwards to thank me, or ask how I am. He doesn't think I might like to see him too from time to time. Sometimes – I don't like saying it...' She pauses. 'I feel a bit used.'



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Only call Gran when her babysitting services are required!

The gulf that can separate grandparent and adult child was recently set out in the Daily Mail, when writer Liz Hodgkinson responded to a survey on loneliness by Age UK.

Liz lamented that she rarely saw her two adult sons or five grandchildren, and that her sons only called if they wanted something.

The next day, by way of reply, her son Tom explained that when his first baby was born, he had moved into a house round the corner from Liz in London in the hope that she would 'help out with the childcare' and give his partner 'a much-needed break'.

'People can be amazingly selfish and start taking their parents for granted'

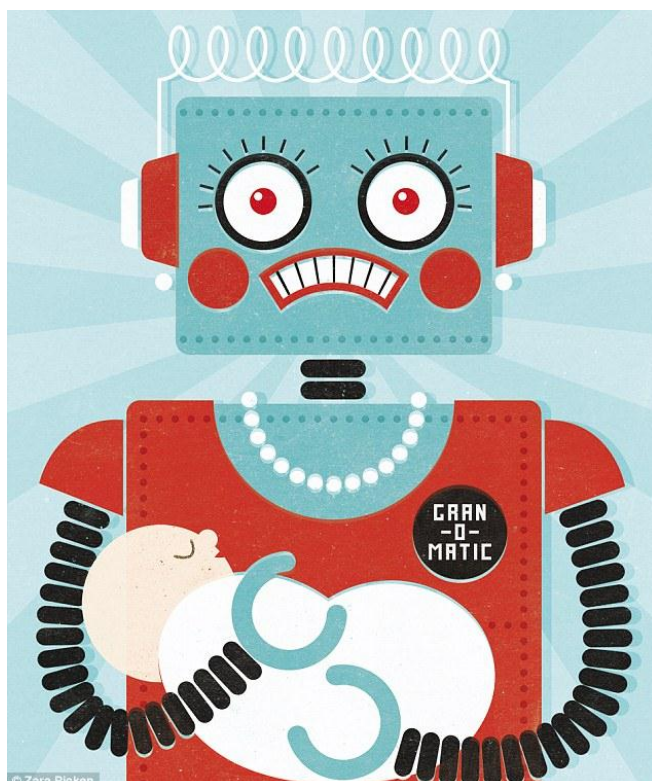
When Liz proved 'too busy running her own life to help with ours', Tom and family relocated to Devon. 'Well, Mum, if you want to see more of your grandchildren it can easily be arranged,' he wrote. Was he inviting Liz to stay? A family lunch, perhaps? Alas, no. 'Half-term is coming up,' he continued, 'and I'll be glad to send them to you for the whole thing.'

If Tom is guilty of reducing his mother to a childminding service, he isn't the only one. Such sentiments are echoed on the parenting website Mumsnet.

One recent poster writes that she fell out with her parents when she and her family drove over to deliver a present for her dad's birthday – then asked if she and her husband could leave the children there and go shopping for a couple of hours. (Perhaps her parents had other plans.)

'My husband's parents aren't much better,' she continues. 'They want to "see" the children but don't want to take them out or entertain them. They expect them to sit and listen to adult conversations [mostly about their health problems].' She ends with a message to 'all grandparents out there: if you're not seeing as much of your grandchildren as you would like, invite them to stay during the next school hols. And please STOP CALLING IT FREE CHILDCARE!!! It's family – you do it out of love.'

The casual dismissal of her in-laws' failing health begins to explain why some grandparents are becoming fed up. Does becoming a grandparent mean that, in the eyes of the children, they cease to be fully rounded adults with interests, opinions, experiences worth listening to? Is 'adult conversation' really too much to ask?



‘Just as mums complain of losing their identity when they have children, in the eyes of my son and his wife I’ve become a grandma and nothing else,’ says Sandra. ‘They aren’t interested in what I do when I’m not looking after their children. I have lots of friends but they never ask after them; if I was worried about anything, I wouldn’t bother them.’

In days gone by, grandparents were ‘special guests’, loved and valued but rarely expected to provide a ‘service’.

Now they regularly perform childcare duties for their grandchildren. ‘Most grandparents want to be with their grandchildren,’ says psychotherapist Christine Webber, author of *Too Young to Get Old*. ‘For many, their children are living with a level of debt that frightens them, and helping with the grandchildren is a way to contribute towards their children having a better quality of life. But sometimes young people can be amazingly selfish and start taking their parents for granted, instead of seeing them as separate people with their own lives, interests and feelings.’

Jackie Highe, a grandmother of five, devotes a chapter to this issue in her book *The Modern Grandparents Guide*. ‘It’s a tricky balance [for parents],’ she says. ‘Your children haven’t replaced you in the eyes of your own parents, who love their grandchildren, and will do anything to be with them – but they love you, too, and need to feel valued and appreciated.’

As a mother of three young children who are cared for one day a week by her mother, Verity Gill, 34, is very aware of the pitfalls. ‘I work from home. Mum cares for the children at my house so, in the middle of the working day, she brings me a cup of tea and wants to chat.

I should make time – she’s not a nanny – but I’ve got all this work to do. It was the first thing that caused tension when the grandchildren arrived.

When Mum was looking after my sister’s children, my sister went straight to the gym after work instead of coming home.

When you’re a new mum, you’re desperate to grab time for yourself, but Mum really wanted that couple of hours with her daughter to catch up on her life.

‘I’m guilty of it, too – when Mum said she was going on holiday, my first thought was, “How am I going to manage?” instead of, “That’s great, where are you going?”’

STOP CALLING IT FREE CHILDCARE!!! It’s family – you do it out of love

Ironically, Verity works on Grannynet.co.uk – a website she founded in recognition of grandparents’ increasingly hands-on role. Its forum provides an insight into grandparents’ frustrations. One poster, ‘Mugnanny’, looks after her nine-year-old granddaughter and would love to go on holiday but her daughter has no other childcare in place.

On another thread, grandparents rally behind comments made by author Jilly Cooper about the modern-day assumption that ‘granny’ and ‘nanny’ are interchangeable. ‘Good for her!’ cheers one. ‘Anyone care to refer Mumsnet to it?’ ‘Certainly not me!’ replies another. ‘Don’t want to get my head bitten off!’

Meanwhile, on Mumsnet, a mother of two complains that her in-laws provide childcare for other grandchildren but not hers because she and her husband can afford a nursery.

Though she admits that financially, they are not in need, she is aggrieved: ‘We wanted our children to have more family contact – maybe half a day a week,’ she complains. (So why not invite the grandparents over for Sunday lunch instead?)

Another poster is bothered by her parents’ request not to look after her children all day in future but for the children to spend half a day in nursery instead. (Apparently, they are in their 60s, fit, healthy and wouldn’t be doing anything else with their ‘free morning’ except the crossword!)

‘Grandparents aren’t always as forthright as we are in expressing what they are really feeling,’ says Gill. ‘For them, family comes first – often at great sacrifice. But families can

quickly turn from everything being fine to feelings being hurt but not expressed – then suddenly, it's broken. The key is to think yourself into the other person's point of view – how must they be feeling, what else is going on in their lives? How can I thank them? Crucially, just because your parents love and adore your children, don't assume that everything between you is fine.'

NOT JUST GRANDPARENTS BUT PEOPLE TOO...

How to nurture the relationship: advice from Jackie Highe

- If your parents are going to provide childcare, discuss every detail first — where it should be, the travel implications, the food, the petrol, payment. You may not want to offer money in case you insult them — and they may not want to ask, in case they seem mercenary. People assume it's 'family', so don't bother with such details — but they matter very much.
- Have backup, alternative childcare you can slot into place rather than instantly resorting to grandparents. The feeling that there is no plan B when they need a break, have a cold or want to make other plans will turn a pleasure into a chore.
- Never use emotional blackmail ('Help! I'm desperate!'). Grandparents will respond by going the extra mile, but the gain will be short term.
- Notice if your parents are becoming more tired, quiet, grumpy — if they are struggling, they may not want to bring it up. Ask in a loving way, 'How are you finding it?' Keep checking in — and showing your appreciation, perhaps with a bottle of wine or flowers.
- Just because your parents are minding your children doesn't mean you've 'seen' them. Ring-fence extra time with them — visit at the weekend, ask them for dinner. We often become so focused on our children that we regret the things we didn't get around to doing with our own parents ('We always said we'd go to Paris for the weekend...' 'I meant to take Dad to the Imperial War Museum'). Spend time with them without the grandchildren.
- Don't go on holiday with parents and use them as babysitters — it breeds resentment. Do it to enjoy their company — and give them a break as well as you.
- Stay in touch with their lives, their neighbours, friends and interests. They may be busy people — but call them for no reason other than to chat!

Read more: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/you/article-2299487/When-Granny-left-holding-baby-Do-advantage-grandparents.html#ixzz2POtRtg20>