

# The guide for the modern grandparent

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## A family expert explores what we expect from the modern grandparent and how much time they should spend with grandkids

“We have two lovely girls of 3 and 5 and two of the most disinterested grandparents. They show no real interest in them beyond buying unsuitable presents occasionally”; “My mother-in-law looks after our son two days a week. She’s very possessive. When she has him she treats him like her own, changes his clothes into ones she has bought and keeps at her house, and ignores the routine I have got him used to. I know she thinks I’m a crap mum and that she knows better how to bring up kids.”

These are fairly typical posts from mums who use the Good Granny website ([www.goodgranny.com](http://www.goodgranny.com)) to share their problems: there are grandparents, it seems, who don’t give their grandchildren enough love and attention. Others give too much. Saddest of all, perhaps, are the messages posted by grandparents who have much to offer and long to help but are ignored by their children.

Fortunately, most parents and grandparents find the grandparent-parent-grandchild relationship joyful and productive. Those with problems are in a minority, albeit a significant one, and, with 80 per cent of children in the UK cared for by grandparents in one way or another, the problems need airing. It’s such a thorny issue that one grandma and mother team are creating a Grandparent Charter, with guidelines on what parents and grandparents can expect, on [www.grannynet.co.uk](http://www.grannynet.co.uk).

### **How much time can parents reasonably expect grandparents to give?**

I have one friend who spends every Tuesday with her granddaughter; another couple (grandfathers as well as grandmothers help out) have two grandchildren to stay for the six-week summer holidays; another has her wayward teenage granddaughter living with her permanently, while others see their grandchildren once a year if they’re lucky - when they can scrape together the fare to Australia. Collectively they contribute to a national average of three days’ childcare each week.

Three days a week is a rather misleading statistic. The truth is that each family has different requirements and make different arrangements. But there seems to be an idea

among parents that they have a right to expect grandparents to give a certain amount of time.

Grandparents don't always agree. The traditional image, still peddled in children's books and on TV programmes, of grey-haired oldsters knitting by the fireside or tottering around on walking sticks, is out of date.

Today's grandparents are relatively young (the average age for becoming a grandmother is 55) and fit, and many work full time. Those who are retired have ambitions to fulfil: travelling Route 66 on a Harley, perhaps, climbing Mount Everest for charity (like a 70-year-old friend of mine), studying sculpture or scuba diving. So parents should not be surprised if, much as grandparents love their grandchildren, looking after them is not their top priority.

Unrealistic expectations can cause friction in a family, so it's worth setting out what can and should be expected on both sides.

### **Should you expect granny and grandpa to be regular childminders?**

In most young families both parents are at work and need regular childcare. Many prefer to keep it in the family and feel that it's a natural role for grandparents. The consensus among grandparents is that while they may be happy to look after the children regularly, it shouldn't be regarded as a duty.

"My husband and I look after our grandson two days a week - he stays overnight - and it's the delight of our life. We do it because we love being with him," says one granny, "not because my son and daughter-in-law expect it."

But others are firmly against any regular arrangement: "I don't want to be a childminder, full or part-time, paid or unpaid." "I babysit sometimes and I'm always there as a safety net if one of the children is ill or my daughter and her partner can't pick them up from nursery and school, but I'm still working part-time and have my own life to lead."

Some live too far away for regular childcare to be feasible. Others have reached an age when, although young at heart, they find looking after children hard work and tiring. They wouldn't dream of admitting it, but after a day with a three-year-old and a six-month-old, they are run ragged and need a day to recover. Grandparents should think hard about the commitment they make if they agree to be carers regularly.

### **Should parents pay grandparents to look after their children?**

This is something each family must decide for itself. I know grandparents who would feel insulted if they were offered money to do what, for them, is a joy and privilege. Others feel that being paid would put them under too great an obligation; they would feel unable to say "no" when they wanted to, turning a pleasure into a chore.

Most grandparents I asked said they wouldn't dream of asking to be paid - they are thrilled to be able to help and love spending time with their grandchildren - but they do like their contribution to be acknowledged.

A mother explains: “Neither my mum nor I would be comfortable with a commercial arrangement. She fetches our son from nursery three days a week when I work late, gives him tea, bathes him and reads to him. They have a riotous time together. My husband and I show our appreciation by giving her flowers or a bottle of wine, and taking her out for a meal or to a film now and then.”

Yet if a grandparent is saving the parents the cost of a professional childminder, and being deprived of income from a paid job, she will be out of pocket and it seems right that they should reimburse her. One grandmother keeps her relevant bills and her daughter and partner settle up with her at the end of each week.

In another family where the grandparents look after two grandchildren two days each week, the parents keep them supplied with nappies, clothes, toys, books and baby food. Help with travel expenses is also much appreciated. Whatever the financial arrangements are, the important thing is for everyone to be happy with them.

### **Should parents expect grandparents to stick to their rules?**

Most parents are forgiving when grandparents spoil the grandchildren rotten, breaking parental rules about sweets, ice-cream, TV and bedtime. They are conforming to their traditional image and the children understand that rules at granny’s house are different from at home. But trouble can arise if granny takes on the role of unpaid nanny, and sets about improving (as she sees it) her grandchild’s diet, potty training, sleep patterns, table manners and general behaviour.

The more regular their commitment, the more granny and grandpa feel justified in trying to influence their grandchildren’s upbringing. But ultimately the grandchildren are not their responsibility, and even if they disapprove of their children’s methods, they should respect them and refrain from undermining them. But it’s always good to bring differences out in the open, in the hope of arriving at a compromise.

This doesn’t mean saying, “A good smack never did you and harm”, or, “We were brought up to finish everything on our plates”. Tact is the name of the game.

It’s important to reach agreement about the three big issues: food, sleep, discipline. Nap and bedtime routines should be adhered to, and if the parents have strong ideas about diet, grandparents should respect them. If they are vegetarians for instance, grandma shouldn’t feed the children on steak. But they will benefit from sampling new ingredients, cooked and presented in grandma’s different style.

Grandparents are not always up to speed with the latest dietary research, so parents should explain that the reason they ban chocolate and sugary biscuits is not because they are spoilsports.

The Good Granny Companion, by Jane Fearnley-Whittingstall (Short Books, £12.99), is available for £11.70, incl p&p, from Times Books First. Phone 0870 608080 or visit [www.timesonline.co.uk/timesbooksfirst](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/timesbooksfirst)

[www.goodgranny.com](http://www.goodgranny.com)

## **THE GRANDMOTHER: ‘I enjoy it when my children ask for help’**

Gwennie Peters, 80 (pictured below with one of her grandchildren), has six children and 17 grandchildren. She lives with her husband in Heswall, Cheshire

“One of my daughters, Debbie, lives a long way away and I don’t think that her children relate to us as much as the grandchildren who live near us - they don’t see us as much. I don’t feel guilty about it, it’s a fact of life. I try to be fair to all my grandchildren but I would like to be closer to Debbie’s. We spent a week with them on a boat in Greece this summer, which was super.

“At times my two daughters who live locally were quite dependent on me and I saw a lot of their children. We helped with babysitting, DIY and washing. I enjoy it when my children ask for my help. I don’t think anyone has over-stepped the mark.

“We stay with Debbie and her family in Hampshire but we don’t like to impose on them. It’s a strain on a family to have grandparents staying. The fathers don’t have much time with their family, the last thing they want is some old codger expecting things. And as you get older you are not as flexible.”

### **HER DAUGHTER**

Debbie Caldwell, 41, the youngest of six, has three children, aged 7, 5 and 2. She lives in Hampshire and sees her parents twice a year

“I don’t expect help, I feel that my parents have brought up six kids; they’ve done enough. I’d rather pay for childcare. We’ve never asked them to stay so we can have weekends away. If they were younger I might think differently, but I think they should just be able to enjoy their grandchildren.

“One sister who lives nearer to my parents has had much more help over the years without appearing to realise it. But at my mother’s 80th birthday she did write the most moving poem for her - that was her way of showing gratitude.

“My Mum is very fair with all the grandchildren, giving our children as much attention as the ones she sees more regularly. We don’t see them that often, which makes it more precious when we do. We were very tearful and emotional when it was time to leave our holiday this year - it was really special to be together.”

### **Rules for parents**

Don’t take your parents’ help for granted; they have their own lives to lead.

Respect your parents’ right to say “No”.

If your mother spends too much time and energy on your child, don’t just think “why doesn’t she get a life?” Help her to get one.

Remember that older people tire more easily.

Do meet up just for fun sometimes, not just when you need help. Between visits,

encourage the children to chat to grandparents on the telephone, or send them pictures they have made.

Know that grandparents who are uneasy with babies may form close relationships when the children are a bit older.

Give grandparents credit for the wisdom that comes with experience.

If you need more help than you're getting, ask. Some grandparents are nervous of butting in.

## **Rules for grandparents**

If you can, offer regular help. The more often you see the children, the more rewarding your relationship will become.

Don't treat your grandchildren as if they were your children.

Do be even-handed. It can cause hurt feelings if one family gets more of your attention than another. If there's a good reason (geography, working hours), explain

Get your children to explain their childcare philosophy and follow it as best you can.

Don't tell a child off in front of his parents. If the child is a real pain, you might tell him firmly to stop just once. But it's up to the parents to deal with the problem, not you, and if they don't, it's too bad.

Feel free to say "No". Remember times have changed, and old-fashioned ways are not always best.

Even stay-at-home mums are glad of help, specially in the school holidays.

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