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Learning to Be a Grandmother

Care and support by grandmothers is linked to pro-social behavior and longevity.

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My daughter recently had a baby, which means that I now have two lovely granddaughters. I am, of course, very happy and excited about the new member of the family. But I am also more worried about a number of things. I worry about the state of the world. I worry about whether my granddaughters will enjoy long, healthy, and happy lives. I worry that some disaster will befall me and I will not be around to see them grow up. I worry if, despite my best efforts, I might not have a positive and mutually satisfying relationship with them.

I teach development courses and spend considerable class time talking about the joys and frustrations of inter-generational relationships. Occasionally the

students discuss the central role that their grandparents play in their lives. They say that they have close relationships with them. When asked to list the people who matter the most in their lives, my students rank grandparents after friends, lovers, parents, and siblings. While this is not necessarily problematic, I find myself, somewhat anxiously, wanting to be an important presence in the lives of my granddaughters. As a reasonably confident woman with a [career](#), satisfying relationships, interests and hobbies, I am surprised at my [anxiety](#). I do not recall my own grandparents having any worries about the nature of their relationship with me.

In my struggle to sort out how to be a grandmother, I interviewed a number of other grandmothers and read the research on grand mothering. While the research in this area is somewhat sparse, findings suggest that a satisfying relationship with grandparents has many positive consequences for grandchildren. Research also indicates that there are no clear role expectations for grandparents. Like other social roles, the role of grandmother is culturally contoured and based on social context in which it is played. That contemporary grand-[parenting](#) role has been complicated by the rise of single parent families, the growth of parental employment, and high cost of quality childcare. Such rapid and irrevocable social change has impacted the lived role of grandmothers. Indeed, an increasing number of grandmothers are becoming the caretakers of their grandchildren. Statistics indicate that more than 7 million American children are living in homes with grandparents, millions of grandparents usually grandmothers provide regular care for their grandchildren. Evolutionary researchers tell us, in fact, that this longstanding fact may have been a historically significant. According to Kristen Hawkes of the University of Utah, grandmothers played a crucial role in the evolution of human relationships. She suggests that the social [cooperation](#) provided by grandmothers may have been the key to the evolution of humans. Indeed, grandmothers have long been the key link in pro-social behavior.

In an early study Apple (1956) explored the social role of grandparents from a cross-cultural perspective. He found that relationships between grandparents and their grandchildren varied depending on the role and status of older men and women. In societies in which older adults held considerable power and prestige, their relationships with grandchildren tended to be more formal and distant. In societies in which parents and children have more egalitarian relationships, the grandparent/grand child relations tend to be warmer and more indulgent. European-American grandmothers appear to prefer the role of companions to their grandchildren. They prefer not to discipline grandchildren.

Grandmothers in other societies, like Taiwan for example, see themselves as caregivers and express more comfort at disciplining grandchildren.

The contemporary role of grandmother shifts from mentor and friend to [caregiver](#). Neugarten and Weinstein (1964) conducted one of the first psychological studies of grandmothers. They described five general patterns of grand parenting (formal, pleasure seeking, surrogate, parent, distant, and a source of family information). Recent studies in the United States have found [ethnicity](#) and culture shapes the role of grandparents--especially grandmothers. Hispanic and African American grandmothers, for instance, tend to be more involved in the day to day lives of their grandchildren. European American grandmothers, by contrast, tended to see themselves as their grandchild's friend and mentor.

Regardless of the structure of the role, being a grandmother necessitates a reconstruction of [identity](#). Change and adaptability is possible, according to Gergen (1991) the self has the capacity to adapt to changing social and cultural demands. Despite ageist stereotypes of grandmothers, studies have even found that women take pleasure in the grand-parenting role, which makes them feel younger and more engaged with life. Those who adopt a more positive grand-parenting identity experience a greater sense of well-being, and feel a deepened sense of meaning and purpose in life. Becoming a grandmother has the potential for renewal, continuity, self-fulfillment, and personal growth.

Sooner or later most women will become grandmothers. Of the women who have children, 94% become grandparents. Seventy five percent of all adults become grandparents. Most women become grandmothers in their mid to late forties, they spend one third of their lives as a grandmother.

The [midlife](#) period is also a time of life when many women have greater opportunity for personal freedom and growth. It is a time when women can finally put aside the "tyranny of the should" as Karen Horney (1968) put it and follow their inner desires and wishes. How does becoming a grandmother effect the freedom and independence of middle life? In my case, I can assert that the time I get to spend with my lovely little granddaughters is one of the most satisfying and enjoyable ways to pass an afternoon, although not every afternoon. Regardless of the personal and cultural construction of the grandmother role, constructing satisfying relationships with one's grandchildren is critical for any grandmother's [happiness](#) and well-being. It has deepened my happiness and sweetened my life.