



GRANDPARENTS FOREVER



Kansas State University
Agricultural Experiment Station
and Cooperative Extension Service

A grandparent and grandchild can have a wonderful, nurturing relationship that benefits both of them. What happens to this relationship when a child's parents divorce? Grandparents often feel left out and are uncertain if they will be allowed to continue grandparenting, especially if their adult child does not have primary custody of the grandchild.

The purpose of this lesson is to:

- explore grandparent/grandchild relations.
- identify the possible effect of divorce on grandparenting.
- recognize ways grandparents can cope with divorce in the family.
- initiate discussion on how individuals can support families experiencing divorce.

Planning the lesson

As a leader, teaching this lesson will be enhanced if you:

- read the entire leader's guide before you present the lesson.
- prepare yourself by thinking about people's reactions and how you will respond.
- have available a flip chart, chalk board or overhead projector with clear transparencies and marker if you want to write down group responses.

The Lesson

Grandparenting is different for every grandparent and grandchild. Some grandparents are very active in their grandchildren's lives; others are not. Becoming a grandparent may be exciting and fun, but for others, it may seem too early in their lives or may even be scary. Some grandparents may see it as a second chance to "parent" their own children.

The relationship a parent has with the adult child influences the way a grandparent takes on his or her role. If the parent and adult child have a strained relationship, the grandparent's involvement will be different from the family where the parent and adult child have a strong relationship. For those of you who are grandparents, think about the first time you became a grandparent. How did it feel?

Part I. Grandparenting: A Changing Role

As children grow, their relationships with others change. Toddlers and young children spend a great deal of time with parents and other adults. Later, their center of focus becomes other children. By adolescence, children devote most of their time to peers. Think about the following questions regarding a child's relationship with grandparents who are not raising their grandchild. If you do not have grandchildren, think about your own childhood relationship with your grandparents. (Be prepared to write responses in two columns on a flip chart, blank transparency, or chalk board. Label the first column *Young grandchildren* and the second *Teen-age grandchildren*.)

Starting with the first column, think about these questions:

- What do grandparents and grandchildren do together?
- When do grandparents and grandchildren see each other?
- What do grandparents and grandchildren talk about?

Now let's think about grandchildren getting older and how the grandparent-grandchild relationship changes. (Ask the same questions again, and record the responses in the second column.)

It is normal for children to increase their involvement with friends their own age and decrease their involvement with adults, including grandparents, as they become teen-agers. Decreased interaction with adolescent grandchildren does not mean that the emotional tie is any less. It means the child is growing up and needs more independence and autonomy. A strong bond between a grandparent and grandchild at an early age increases the chances of a successful relationship as the child gets older.

Prepared by
Charlotte Shoup Olsen, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor and
Extension Specialist,
Family Systems,
School of Family Studies
and Human Services,
Kansas State University



Part II. . . . And Then There Was Divorce . . .

Think about the changes that come about because of an adult child's divorce. If you have not had this situation, think about the experiences of others in your community. Let's brainstorm the following (if necessary, break into smaller groups):

- How does the grandparenting role change during and after divorce?
 - How is the grandparent-grandchild relationship affected?
 - What are the differences between the grandparents whose children have primary custody and those whose children do not?
- (List responses on a flip chart, chalk board, or blank transparency.)

Divorce affects grandparents differently. Some factors that influence grandparent-grandchild relationships following divorce are the age of the grandchild, the relationship with the adult child, and custody arrangements.

We think of separation and divorce as single events that people go through and put behind them. It is not so simple, especially if there are children involved. In some ways, a divorce involving children is never complete, because adults in the family must learn to adjust to new situations. That includes grandparents.

Grandparents have to learn new ways to fill the role, especially if their adult child does not have primary custody. Since the grandparent's relationship with the adult child before the divorce influences the relationship afterward, the adult child, to some extent, continues to influence the grandparent-grandchild relationship.

For some grandparents, divorce brings added responsibility: financial support for the adult child and grandchildren, or caregiving for young grandchildren. Grandparents may become the emotional supporters for their children, and may feel their lives have been affected almost as much as their child's life.

Some grandparents, often the grandparent whose child does not have custody, experience a loss of contact with the custodial parent and grandchildren. These grandparents must contend with the adult child's divorce while they experience the grief and loss over reduced contact with grandchildren. Grandparents may assume that the former in-law does not welcome their help and support with the grandchildren. That might not be true, (especially if they live in the same community). The grandparent, however, may need to take the first step in offering to do such things as providing transportation to lessons and events. Helping the custodial parent also allows the grandparent to have more contact with the grandchildren. Other grandparents may not have had much contact with their grandchildren before the divorce, so there is little change in the relationship.

Let's think about the following question:

- What are ways to cope with an adult child's divorce?
- (List their answers and then talk about the following suggestions.)

Coping with an adult child's divorce can be difficult. Each situation is different, but here are six suggestions to help grandparents adjust to the changes in the lives of their adult child and grandchildren.

1. Deal with grief and anger.

The loss of the grandparent-grandchild bond to which you are accustomed may be emotionally difficult. Grief may be accompanied by anger that will not go away. This can lead to further problems. These feelings are very normal, but you should be willing to share your feelings with others. It may be best to share with family and friends, not your adult child who is divorcing, because your child is involved with his or her own feelings and family changes. Professional help is also available for grandparents who are uneasy about turning to family or friends for support or just need additional support.

2. Talk about your involvement.

Some individuals may prefer the social and recreational functions of their grandparenting role before their child's divorce. They may not be interested in a parental role with their adult child or grandchildren. Nevertheless, following a marital disruption, grandparents may act as parents for an extended period and suddenly must contend with discipline issues and direction of grandchildren. Also grandparents may be asked to provide financial support.

Grandparents need to talk to their adult child about the types and amounts of support that they can give. It may be difficult, but it can help the adult child set realistic goals and avoid future conflicts with the grandparents.

For instance, your adult son has filed for divorce and the custody of his two children. He says he must have child care to be granted custody of the children and asks you to agree to take care of them while he is at work. You have recently retired and do not want to take on this responsibility, but you want to remain supportive. What do you do? (Ask participants for their responses.)

Suggestion: Let your son know that you love and enjoy your grandchildren, but you do not want to be a full-time care provider. Suggesting appropriate, affordable child care providers allows you to support his decision and set limits for yourself.

3. Maintain neutrality with the grandchildren.

Grandparents should take special precautions not to side with one parent over another. That can be especially difficult for the grandparents whose child does not have custody, and who may already feel shut out by the custodial parent. Showing support and love to your adult child is important, but remaining neutral by not talking badly about the former in-law in front of the grandchild will help the child avoid loyalty conflicts between one parent and the other. It can lessen future relationship problems with an adult child or the former spouse.

Think about the following remarks and how to change them so they are more helpful for the divorcing family. (Ask for responses.)

- *Your dad is a pretty bad guy. He was really mean to your mom.*

This type of comment sets up a loyalty conflict. Children will handle the situation differently, depending on age, personality, and family situation. Some might come to the defense of the father, while others may not openly challenge the remarks, but internalize the conflict. Find someone other than your adult child or grandchildren to vent your feelings about the former in-law.

- *I know your parents will get back together. Just be patient.*

Many children of divorced parents want their parents to reunite and get married more than anything else. This fantasy often persists even after one of the parents marries someone else. Grandparents who reinforce this fantasy are not helping the child or themselves adjust to irreversible family changes.

- *You can live with me if you are unhappy.*

This type of comment undermines parents as they adjust to their new situations. You may not approve of the decisions your child or the former spouse make, but avoid pulling the grandchild into conflicts you have with the parent.

Giving a grandchild time and companionship is important during this transition. The child is dealing with an overwhelming sense of loss as well as strong feelings of sadness, loneliness, guilt, confusion, worry, embarrassment, and/or anger. The child needs a listening ear, but not responses that make it harder for the parents to parent apart. Only make an exception if there is abuse or neglect.

4. Maintain a flexible attitude.

Research findings suggest that grandparents who maintain flexible attitudes toward the decisions their adult child makes usually have better relationships with them following divorce. For instance, your adult daughter has been going through a divorce and has custody of the children. However, for the past several weeks, she has begun dating a man you do not like. You feel she is dating too soon, and it is upsetting your 13-year-old granddaughter. What do you do? (Ask for group responses.)

Suggestion: Remember that your daughter's life is her own. You can, however, speak with her concerning your granddaughter. While you share your perceptions about the granddaughter's reactions, remember to listen to your daughter and to give each other time to express feelings.

5. Set new goals for yourself and your grandchildren.

Divorce can lead to changes in the grandparent role and the way grandparents think of themselves. One way to cope with changing roles is to define new goals for yourself and your grandchildren. Think about what you can do, even if your adult child does not have custody of the grandchildren. Ask yourself:

- What do I want for my grandchildren? (i.e., safety, security, self-esteem, personal and social skills.)
- What do I want to do to help my grandchild achieve these goals?
- What do I want out of my grandparent-grandchild relationship? Examples might be creation of long-lasting memories for each other; maintenance of family lineage, history, and name; or assurances about division of family assets.

6. Maintain regular contact.

Most children benefit from contact with their grandparents, not just on holidays and birthdays, but throughout the year. This is not always easy when a grandparent does not live close to grandchildren or has conflicting job responsibilities. Consider your relationship with your grandchild before the divorce, building on what you are willing to maintain. Think creatively about what you can do in your situation. For instance, call just to speak to your grandchild, if only for a couple of minutes. Send your grandchildren pictures of their parent at about the same age. Send surprises in your letters: flower petals, stamps, or Sunday comics. Ask about your grandchild's friends and remember their names. Tape-record a childhood story. Exchange e-mail messages. Request a private performance if you miss your grandchild's concert or event.

Maintaining relationships with grandchildren through personal, telephone, or written contact can be supportive and helpful to both grandchild and grandparent.

Part III. Community Support

Others in the community can provide support, comfort, and resources for the family going through divorce. Besides grandparents, aunts and uncles, friends, former in-laws, teachers, clergy, and community volunteers are part of a potential network of support.

We are going to brainstorm how we, as individuals or as a group, can support families as they go through the divorce process. (List the responses on a flip chart, chalk board, or blank transparency.)

Many things can help. Sometimes it is personal: helping a friend think of ways to maintain contact with a grandchild. Step-grandparents can offer to help, especially if the biological grandparents do not live in the community. A group project could be buying library books that help children, parents, and grandparents cope with divorce. A community member can ask schools, agencies, and local organizations to start support groups for children and adults. Support groups can teach family members communication skills, help them improve their coping skills, and deal with the reality of the situation. Therapy, counseling, support groups, and educational programs can help both children and adults deal with divorce.

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Grandparents' Dilemma: Adult Children Divorcing, by Aadron J. Rausch and Dena B. Targ, Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service, was used as a primary resource for this publication.

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