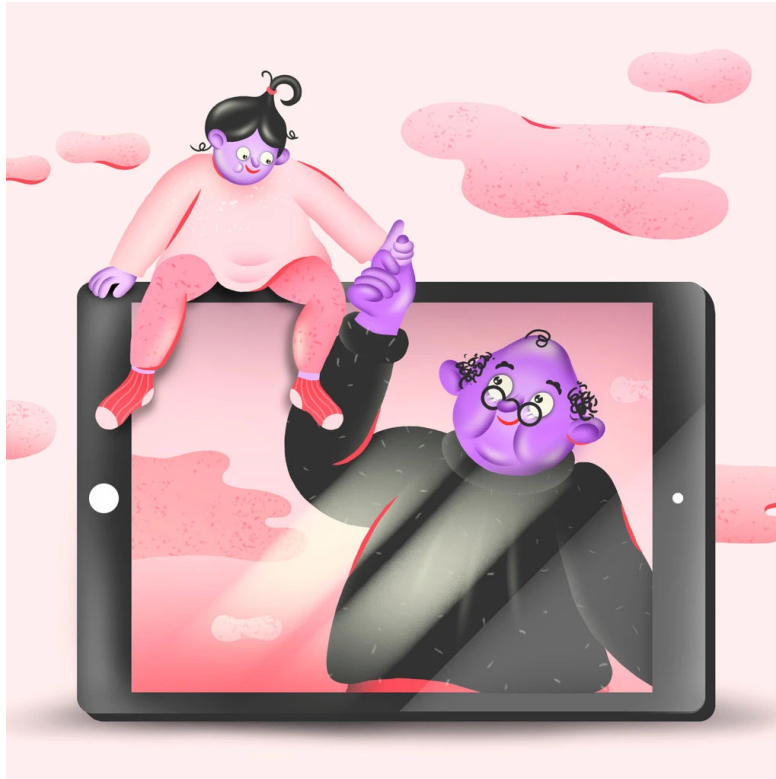


# When the Grandparents Don't Visit

Grandparents can play a vital role in a child's life, but visits from them aren't always a sure thing.



Sofia Hydman

By **Bridget Shirvell**

April 17, 2020



*This story was originally published on Nov. 21, 2019 in NYT Parenting.*

The sweet melody of baby laughter fills my apartment, making it impossible not to smile. My year-old daughter is chortling, making silly faces with my mom. She's happy, confident and completely at ease with her maternal grandmother, who is a familiar presence in her young life.

My daughter was only a few hours old when my parents braved the I-95 traffic from Connecticut to New York to meet her, and now she has never

gone more than a month without seeing at least one of them. I love seeing their relationships grow, but watching them together, I can't help but also feel a little sad for my daughter, husband and in-laws.

We live across the country from my in-laws, and they haven't met my daughter yet. We have extended invitations — “Come for her first Christmas,” we asked, followed by “Come during the summer” and “Come for her first birthday” — but they have put us off. Neither likes to travel, and my father-in-law worries about who would take care of the cows on his farm in his absence. They would love it if we visited, but between our hesitancy to travel a long distance in the early months of new parenthood and now work obligations, it hasn't happened. My husband has not gotten to experience the joy I've felt watching my parents become grandparents.

*[Read about [how to deal](#) with interfering grandparents.]*

Whether it is because of distance, health problems, work, financial considerations, [maternal advantage](#) or past family issues, there is much that is lost when grandparents can't or don't visit. From a practical standpoint, new parents miss out on family support, and possible financial support and help in caretaking. Grandparents and grandkids miss out on building a relationship in which grandparents not only share family history but also become a trusted source for advice and emotional support.

ADVERTISEMENT

While there is little recent data on how many grandparents routinely interact with their grandchildren, there is plenty on the importance of the grandchild-grandparent relationship. [In one 2014 study, researchers from Boston College](#) found that a close relationship between grandchild and grandparent resulted in fewer symptoms of depression for both. And a [2008](#)

[study](#) from the University of Oxford showed that a close relationship with a grandparent had a positive impact on an adolescent's well-being.

“Not only does the relationship help children get along better with others, it also provides them with a support system,” said Ashley S. Lingerfelt, a licensed associate professional counselor in Georgia and a perinatal mental health specialist. “It can also reduce depression in grandchildren and grandparents, and on a basic level, each can teach the other new things.”

---

**Thanks for reading The Times.**  
**[Subscribe to The Times](#)**

---

When I was pregnant, I didn't give much thought to the grandparent-grandchild relationship, just assuming that both sets of grandparents would visit. But in talking with other mothers, I realized that it wasn't that unusual for grandparents not to visit or be involved with their grandchildren.

Lingerfelt said that grandparents might not visit for a variety of reasons, including differing parenting styles or approaches to child care, as well as distance. “If they can't see their grandchild frequently,” she said, “they might have little motivation to travel across the country to see a baby that they assume won't remember them.”

Kelly Burch, 30, a mother in New Hampshire, said that distance had been the biggest hurdle keeping her in-laws, who live in Australia, from visiting her two daughters, ages 5 and 1. Burch and her husband used their parental leave to take their children to meet their grandparents within the first six months of their lives, but she wishes they could have more time together.

ADVERTISEMENT

---

“It’s a big loss that I feel for my kids,” Burch said. “My dad, who lives about two hours from us, has some health issues that make him unable to be very involved with the kids. My father-in-law, on the other hand, is an amazing, engaged grandpa who can’t be as present as he would like because of the logistics.”

Burch said her family tried to integrate the Australian grandparents into their daily life as much as they can by talking frequently about them, having their pictures up and connecting with them virtually.

“We FaceTime at least twice a week,” she said. “Often this is over dinner for my kids, so they get a virtual family meal time that they otherwise wouldn’t be able to experience.”

According to [a 2018 AARP survey](#), 38 percent of American grandparents said they sometimes or often used video chat to communicate with their grandkids. (While the American Academy of Pediatrics says children younger than 2 should not have any screen time, it makes an exception for video chats.)

“It’s wonderful that FaceTime and other chat platforms enable us to bridge great distances and maintain relationships with regular weekly or daily video chats,” said Michelle Bell, Psy.D., a psychologist and the owner of Inwood Family Guidance and Psychological Services in New York.

For young children, Dr. Bell said, video chats are more beneficial than a phone call.

“It can be difficult for a child to hold someone’s image in their mind, and they may not have sufficient verbal skills to sustain meaningful conversations on the phone,” she said. “It’s easier to connect and engage more fully with a young child via a video chat. Often a young child wouldn’t be able to describe what they did in day care but a parent can say, ‘Go get the picture you drew and show Abuela.’ It’s a richer experience that helps the relationship develop.”

Virginia Thomas, 69, who lives in Massachusetts, said that finances and distance made it hard for her to see her two grandsons, ages 11 and 9, who live in Florida. She said when they aren’t able to see each other, they use FaceTime and occasionally email to connect.

“I would love to be closer to them so we could spend more time together, but the cost of going there or them coming here makes it hard,” Thomas said, adding that the first few days of a visit “are spent getting reacquainted.”

“I ask them to email me and tell me their school experiences,” she said. “They are not that into writing Grammy, but they try.”

Dr. Bell said that obstacles like distance could definitely affect relationships and could be hard on the overall family system with grandparents unable to help with child care. Families should look for ways to involve grandparents in caretaking, even if it is for a longer period of time only a few times a year. And they should celebrate the time they are there.

“You can tell kids, ‘Grammy and Poppy are coming for a week and they get to stay with us,’” Dr. Bell said.

But what happens when grandparents don’t visit no matter how many invitations are extended?

“You can’t force people to be involved, and that’s what makes it so hard when parents want their own reluctant parents to be involved,” Lingerfelt said. “Parents can extend an invitation, but shouldn’t set themselves up for disappointment. They also need to keep in mind how it affects the child if Grandma or Grandpa are invited but don’t come. While these relationships are important, they have to be wanted by all three parties: child, parents and grandparents.”

Lingerfelt recommends that families have conversations about the role they want grandparents to have in a grandchild’s life and set those expectations as early as possible.

“Just as it’s a transition to become a parent, it’s a transition to become a grandparent,” she said.

---

And there is nothing that says your child's grandparent has to be a family tie.

“Look outside the box; find surrogate grandparents for your child if you can,” Dr. Bell said, suggesting that parents look to a best friend's parents or a longtime neighbor to fill that role.

Eventually, I know, my daughter will meet her paternal grandparents — we plan on visiting next summer — but for now she is building relationships with her elders through my parents, her nanny and a few of our neighbors.

“This idea that familial bonds are only through blood doesn't have to apply,” Dr. Bell said. “There are other ways to give your child the benefits of a grandparent relationship.”

---

Bridget Shirvell is a writer living with her family in the Bronx. Her work has appeared on Civil Eats, Martha Stewart, PBS NewsHour and more.

