



A Correspondence Program for Grandparents and their Grandchildren

Program Instructions

In times past, when families lived closer together and elders were an important part of family life, grandparents often shared in the excitement of childrearing. The first tooth, the first step, the first day of school—each was a tiny miracle to be cherished. Children felt a part of their grandparents' lives and were deeply affected by their loving care and attention.

Today there are changes in society and family life that can disrupt this important relationship between elders and children. Children may be separated from their grandparents by distance or by divorce. Social attitudes may quietly erode values that strengthen elder-child relationships. The grandparent may think, "Don't get involved—stay out of it. Childrearing is the parents' job," or "I don't want to pressure them to let me visit—they have lives of their own to live." Hidden within these kinds of statements is an underlying belief that children and elders do not really need contact with each other or, if they do, elders are powerless to influence the lives of the younger generation. Somehow we have to begin to reestablish and support the vital connection between elders and children.¹

Our lives can be enriched by contact with people of all ages. Children have much to learn from their elders. For their part, elders can benefit from involvement with children by establishing a sense of connection with the younger generation and knowing they play an important role in their lives.²

¹See *Grandparents and Grandchildren: The Vital Connection* by Arthur Cornwallis and Kenneth L. Woodward, Doubleday and Company, Inc., Garden City, New York, 1981.

²See *Grandparenting: A Gift for Generations* by Charles A. Smith, Kansas State University Extension Publication, GT-158a.

GRANDLETTERS is a program designed to strengthen the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren who are separated by distance. The program can also be used by elders who *adopt a grandchild*. Children who have no natural grandparents may enjoy being a sort of "pen pal" to a special elder friend. By using the mail to share their thoughts, feelings and experiences, grandparents and grandchildren will draw closer together, learn from each other and build a reservoir of happy memories.

Ten letters are exchanged, each focusing on a special issue in the following order:

- Affection and friendship
- Family and heritage
- Generosity and love
- Responsibility and courage
- Respect for elders
- Honesty and commitment
- Helpfulness
- Competition and justice
- Conflict and violence
- Sadness and grief

The issues were selected by a group of elders, parents and professionals for their importance to both elders and children.

By trying some of the suggested activities and exchanging letters describing your views and experiences related to the key topic, you and your grandchild will learn more about each other. You will gain the satisfaction of knowing that your ideas are being conveyed to a young, impressionable person. For their part, grandchildren will enjoy discovering more about you. Research shows that children who have a close relationship with their grandparents are less likely to have negative stereotypes of elders or fear of growing older.

MAKING THE PROGRAM WORK

Choose *one* grandchild, 7 to 12 years old

This grandchild should be one who doesn't visit you too often and would benefit from the exchange. If this grandchild has brothers or sisters who also fall into this age range, you might reduce the possibility of jealousy if you start with the oldest child. Explain to the others that you hope to repeat the program with them later.

Contact the grandchild's parents

The parents' involvement will be required with some of the grandchild's activities. Send a set of these program instructions and the Grandchild Letters / Instructions to the child's parents describing the program and how they can help. Be sure to ask them to do the following:

- 1. Introduce the idea to their child.** Parents should be sure that their child understands the program. Tell him/her that—
 - your grandparent will send you a *special letter*. In this *special letter* you will hear stories about your grandparent's life and do fun activities.
 - you will keep a scrapbook. You will keep the drawings, pictures, and *special letters* your grandparent sends you in this book. Your parents will help you make the scrapbook.
 - Your grandparent will tell you what to put in the return *special letter*. With each letter, you will receive instructions for fun activities to do and ideas to write about when it's your turn.
 - If you have any questions or need help, ask your Mom or Dad.
 - Send *your own special letter* back to your grandparent.
- 2. Read materials carefully.**

You will send the directions for the grandchild's letters directly to the parent. Encourage them to contact you with questions.
- 3. Explain to other siblings.**

If the child has brothers or sisters, parents should explain that the grandparent can only do this correspondence with one child at a time.
- 4. Help child make the scrapbook.**

The child will need a three-ring notebook or a similar folder for holding the pictures, drawings and letters you send.
- 5. Answer the child's questions.**

Parents should be available to answer any questions the child may have about the activities. If he or she needs help carrying out the activities, parents should be ready to give encouragement, ideas, and help.

6. Encourage their child to talk about the *special letters*.

7. Help with other arrangements.

Parents may need to help the child locate or borrow an audio-cassette recorder, help purchase audio-cassette tapes or writing materials, or help in packaging and mailing of the *special letters* and activities.

Decide how to correspond

You may write or type your *special letters* or you may tape them with an audio-cassette recorder.

Decide how often to correspond

Most correspondences should take place at least once every two weeks. Allow sufficient time for mailing.

Plan the special letter

Read through all Grandparent Letters / Instructions carefully, paying special attention to the outline of the first letter and complete the checklist of activities. Discuss your ideas and thoughts and ask your grandchild to do the same about the key topic in your *special letter*. Do as many of the additional optional activities as you wish and feel free to include anything you think relates to the topic. Before mailing, listen to or read your letter to make sure you have made your points clearly.

Mail your special letter

Address and mail the material directly to your grandchild.

Enjoy what your grandchild sends

Be aware of your grandchild's reactions to the activities and be flexible in your future planning. Be patient. Correspondence may take longer to complete and send in than what you would hope. Contact the child's parents if the delay is more than 2 weeks to work on resolving unforeseen problems. If the child loses interest completely, don't become discouraged. Choose a different child and begin again.

Follow-up

Let your grandchild's parents know what the course has meant to you. Record your feelings, thoughts, and reactions in your journal.

What You Need for the Program

- 2 copies of these Program Instructions (one for you and one for the parents)
- 1 copy of the Grandparent Letters (for you)
- 1 copy of the Grandchild Letters (for grandchild)

SCRAPBOOK AND JOURNAL

The scrapbook and journal are very important to this program. They will serve as records of both your and the child's experiences. You and your grandchild will each make your own scrapbook. You will need a three-ring notebook or a similar folder for holding your grandchild's letters. The scrapbook will include drawings, pictures, letters, and activities your grandchild has sent. At the end of the program, your grandchild will have a scrapbook containing all the materials you sent.

The journal will be a record of your personal thoughts and observations about each correspondence. You may write in the journal immediately after completing the letter and again after receiving your grandchild's letter, or you may just write in the journal after you receive your grandchild's letter. This will vary with each letter. Your reactions may either be written in a notebook or recorded on an audio-cassette tape.

Direct your comments to your grandchild as though he or she is now an adult. Imagine him or her now as a grown-up, sitting and reading your words, feeling close to you, despite the passage of many years. The journal is like a time capsule, a precious record of you to be appreciated by an adult grandchild.

At the end of your correspondence program, make a copy of the journal for yourself, if you wish, and give the original to the child's parents for safekeeping. Ask the parents to keep the journal in a safe place and to present it to your grandchild when he or she reaches adulthood and can appreciate this record of a grandparent's interest and affection.

The scrapbooks are samples of work and thought that both you and your grandchild can appreciate immediately. The journal is a personal record of your thoughts and feelings about a variety of issues, an opportunity for you to reveal what you believe to be important to a grandchild when he or she reaches adulthood.

Both the scrapbook and journal will be special treasures with lasting value. They will bring you closer to your grandchild and keep you in contact with him or her as time goes by. This program will help you and your grandchild build a firm and lasting relationship despite the distance that separates you.

CONCLUSION

These ten letters you have exchanged will have created a strong foundation for a continuing relationship with your grandchild. When this program is over, we hope you will take the initiative to continue strengthening the relationship. If you and your grandchild have enjoyed these letters, continue corresponding. Identify goals that are relevant and important to you and your grandchild. As your grandchild grows older, examine problems and concerns that he or she faces. Think back to your childhood to find some of these concerns. Create your own activities to convey your ideas to each other.

Here are some suggestions of other ways to keep in touch:

- Continue writing letters.
- Continue exchanging cassette tapes.
- Send postcards.
- Send inexpensive gifts.
- Prepare a grandparent newspaper.
- Make phone calls.
- Plan a visit.
- Send the parent other things to store and give to the child later when he or she becomes an adult.

We are interested in hearing from you about GRANDLETTERS. What kinds of successes and problems did you have? Were the benefits worth your investment of time and effort? How did your grandchild react? Send your comments to:

Charles A. Smith, Ph.D.

Extension Specialist, Human Development
201 Umberger Hall, Kansas State University
Manhattan, Kansas 66506

May your words reach out to defeat time and distance to enrich the life of a special young person.

Comments to Parents

Your support and involvement will contribute to the success of Grandletters. Read these instructions carefully and explain the program to your child. If he or she agrees to participate, let the grandparent know immediately. Make space and materials available to the child to respond to the grandparent's letters. Keep the Grandchild Letters/Instructions in a safe place and show them to the grandchild as needed. Remember, the grandparent sends his or her letter #1 then the grandchild sends his or her letter #1. When the grandparent receives this letter then he or she sends letter #2 and so on. If your child's interest wavers, encourage, but don't force them to participate.

Charles A. Smith
Extension Specialist
Human Development

Gayla Gutsch
Student, Family and Child Development



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