



GRANDPARENTS FOREVER

For grandparents experiencing the divorce of an adult child



Kansas State University
Agricultural Experiment Station
and Cooperative Extension Service

Fact Sheet

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.

Coping with an adult child's divorce can be difficult for grandparents. However, just as grandparents are all different, divorce in the family affects each grandparent differently. Grandparents often have to learn new ways to interact with grandchildren, especially if their adult child does not have primary custody. However, the relationship the grandparent has with the adult child before the divorce has much to do with the relationship that exists afterward. Thus the adult child, to some extent, continues to influence the relationship between grandparent and grandchild.

Although each family's situation is different, the following suggestions might 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 is often emotionally difficult. Grief may be accompanied by anger that will not go away. This can lead to further problems for grandparents trying to cope with the divorce. These feelings are very normal, but you should be willing to share your feelings with others. It may be best to share with other family and friends—not your adult child who is divorcing—as your child is involved with his or her own feelings and family changes. Professional help is available for grandparents who are uneasy about turning to family or friends for support or who just need additional support.

2. Talk about your involvement.

Some individuals may have preferred the social and recreational functions of their grandparenting role before their child's divorce. They may not be interested in a parental role with either their adult child or grandchildren, but may find themselves acting as parents for an extended period. Those who previously enjoyed the fun and indulgent grandparent role suddenly find they must contend with discipline issues and direction of grandchildren. This change in roles can be difficult. Being asked to provide financial support for a divorcing adult child and grandchildren also can be difficult for grandparents living on a fixed income or saving for retirement.

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

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3. Maintain neutrality with the grandchildren.

Grandparents should take special precautions not to side with one parent over another. This can be especially difficult for grandparents whose child does not have custody, and who may already feel isolated and shut out by the custodial parent. However, 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 ex-spouse.

4. Maintain a flexible attitude.

Research findings suggest that grandparents who maintain flexible attitudes toward the decisions their adult child makes usually have fewer relationship problems with their child following divorce.

5. Set new goals for yourself and 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 based on your relationship. Think about what you can do, even if your adult child does not have custody. 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? A few examples might include creating long-lasting memories for each other; maintaining family lineage, history, and family name; or having 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 regularly 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 in the future.

Think creatively about what you can do in your situation. For instance, call just to speak to your grandchild, even if it is just for a minute or two. Give your grandchildren pictures of their parents as close to their ages as possible. 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 and send to your grandchild. Exchange e-mail messages. Request a private performance if you miss a grandchild's concert or event.

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

For further reading:

Helping Your Grandchildren Through Their Parent's Divorce by Joan Schrager Cohen (Walker and Company, New York, NY, 1994).

Little Things Mean A Lot: Creating Happy Memories with Your Grandchildren by Susan Newman (Crown Publishing, New York, NY, 1996).

Grandparents at a Distance: An Activities Handbook for Strengthening Long Distance Relationships by The National Institute for Building Long Distance Relationships (A & E Family Publishers, P. O. Box 16659, Knoxville, TN 37996, to be released in 1999). Ordering information also available at the Web site <http://www.daads.com>.



Evaluation Form

County: _____

Group Sponsoring Lesson:

☐ FCE ☐ Other _____

Directions:

K-State Research and Extension is interested in knowing if this program has been helpful to you. We would appreciate your answers to the following questions.

1. I am a grandparent. ☐ Yes ☐ No (If no, skip to question 3.)
2. I have experienced divorce in my family that involves my grandchildren. ☐ Yes ☐ No
3. Did you learn or review some useful ideas on how grandparents can relate to grandchildren?
☐ Yes ☐ No
4. Did you learn or review some useful ways in which grandparents can cope with divorce in their family?
☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, what information was the most useful?

5. Did you learn or review creative ideas on how you and other community members can be supportive to families experiencing divorce?
☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, what will you or your group plan to do as a result of today's discussion?

6. Will you teach or tell other people any of the information you learned from this lesson?
☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, who? ☐ FCE ☐ Other organization ☐ Family ☐ Friends ☐ Other _____

7. Other comments:

Thank you! Please return this form to your teacher. It helps your County Extension Council and Kansas State University in knowing what kind of information is useful to county residents.

4 PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

Special thanks to Emily Mark, Elisa Shackelton and Kathy Goodin for reviewing this information.

Grandparents' Dilemma: Adult Children Divorcing, written by Aadron J. Rausch and Dena B. Targ, Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service, was used as a primary resource for this publication. Other references are listed in the teaching guide.

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