

The Joys of Grandparenting

How to Mindfully Love Little Ones

by April Thompson



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Being a grandparent can be magical; an opportunity to create both lifelong memories and formative experiences for grandchildren. However, it can also pose challenges that need to be managed mindfully, say experts.

For more than 25 years, Patricia Salem, of Louisville, Kentucky, a licensed and board-certified art therapist, has taught mindfulness practices and art therapy in such diverse settings as hospitals and schools. Aiming to help kids and adults learn to harmoniously ease life's challenges, her work across generations has led her to seek ways to support entire family systems on their individual and familial journey to more mindful living. Her classes focus on skills like cultivating awareness, communication, self-compassion and self-care.

"Teaching mindfulness and stress reduction to children is a start; however, teaching parents and grandparents is important, too. Children need reinforcement at home for practices

they are learning in order for them to take hold," says Salem.

Carolyn Tucker, a psychotherapist in Atlanta, started offering classes on mindful grandparenting six years ago after witnessing a rise in grandparents seeking therapy. "In working with new mothers, I've found that a common area of friction is too little or too much support from grandparents. I thought it wise to help prepare them," says Tucker.

She helps grandparents develop realistic expectations of their role. "It's easy to revert to what you know—the parenting role—so it's important to set mindful intentions," she observes.

Tucker encourages grandparents to make mindful memories during time spent with the grandchildren. "You can find joy by being still and marveling at a grandchild's beautiful little hands and dimpled knees while registering how the air in the room feels to create a vivid mental snapshot of the moment.

"Parents and kids can become too busy, and grandparents can help them

slow down. Lie on the grass together and look at cloud shapes or blow a dandelion. To me, that is the romance of grandparenting, and mindfulness allows the romance to blossom," she says.

Susan Moon, a Berkeley, California, author and grandmother who has practiced Zen Buddhism for nearly 40 years, sees grandparenting as an opportunity to release expectations; this feat can be difficult for parents caught up in their youngsters' identities. "It's easier for grandparents to accept grandkids for who they are and just be joyful with them. They get to be in the moment with the kids without worrying about the day-to-day details of caregiving that can consume parents." She explores such ideas in her book *This is Getting Old: Zen Thoughts on Aging with Humor and Dignity*.

Being past their working years, grandparents are often more accepting and peaceful themselves, which can be inspiring for younger generations, adds Salem. For Moon, it's vital to be mindful of the image of aging that's projected; "I try to model that old age isn't tragic, and show the joy in this stage of life," she says.

Yet grandparents also should be mindful of any physical limitations and set boundaries with grandkids as needed. "It's okay to say, 'I can't hang on the jungle gym with you,' and suggest an alternative," says Moon.

Good relationships with the grandkids begin with maintaining open relationships with their parents, experts note. To do this, consistently engage in compassionate listening. "It can be tempting for grandparents that know what may have worked in raising their own children to react or jump in, but it's important to avoid giving unsolicited advice," Salem cautions.

At the same time, grandparents can notice aspects a harried parent may miss and, if handled carefully, can provide important insights. “I was known as the ‘fairy mom’, offering magic, art and imagination. I was grateful my own mother was there, too, because one child needed more

structure and stability than I was providing,” says Tucker, a mother of four. “She gave me mindful feedback without making me feel like she was trying to usurp my role.”

Moon suggests practicing “right speech”—messages that are positive, affirming and loving—with everyone.

“It’s important to be humble and recognize the huge job of parents and all they juggle. Let them know that you are there to support them in whatever way you can.”

Connect with freelance writer April Thompson, in Washington, D.C., at AprilWrites.com.

CONSCIOUS GRANDPARENTING



Create new memories, but also share old stories. “Kids want to hear about how their parents were as children, and it gives them a sense of history,” advises author Susan Moon.

Be open to learning new technology to communicate across the generational divide. “While grandparents learn about the world of social media from their grandchildren, they can also encourage them to cut back on checking their cell phones in favor of interpersonal activities,” says art therapist Patricia Salem.

When visiting grandkids, especially if they live in different cities, “Always have some ‘grandma magic’ up your sleeve—like games, puzzles or craft projects that can be collaborated on—to maximize precious time together,” suggests Moon.

Invite grandchildren to try out meditation or breathing techniques practiced by their elders. “It can help lessen the stresses they encounter in school and at home,” says Salem.

“Be careful to foster cooperation rather than competition in any shifting relationship with a child-turned-parent,” advises psychotherapist Carolyn Tucker. Otherwise, it can create chaos, undermine a parent’s confidence and strain relationships.

For more advice on being a great grandparent, visit GrandparentsLink.com.