

Contents

Preface	9
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Chapter 1: The Joy of Grandmothers	15
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Chapter 2: Becoming a Grandmother	19
--	-----------

Being told about the pregnancy	19
<i>Hearing the news</i>	19
<i>First thoughts</i>	23
Involvement in the pregnancy	25
<i>Levels of involvement</i>	25
<i>Giving advice</i>	28
The birth	30
<i>Helping out</i>	30
<i>Seeing the baby for the first time</i>	34
The first weeks	36
<i>Helping the new mother</i>	36
<i>Early signs of problems</i>	38

Chapter 3: Doing Things Together	41
---	-----------

Levels of involvement	41
<i>Regular arrangements</i>	41
<i>Living together</i>	44
<i>Distant grandchildren</i>	46
Activities with grandchildren	50
<i>Babies and toddlers</i>	50
<i>Young grandchildren</i>	51
<i>Older grandchildren</i>	55
<i>Grown-up grandchildren</i>	58

<i>Coping with lots of grandchildren</i> _____	59
Family get-togethers _____	61
Holidays together _____	64
Keeping in touch _____	66

Chapter 4: The Emotional Side _____ 70

Love and its expression _____	70
<i>Watching them grow</i> _____	75
<i>Feeling connected</i> _____	77
<i>Physical contact</i> _____	78
<i>Talking about the grandchildren</i> _____	82
<i>Worrying</i> _____	86
<i>Happy memories</i> _____	92
Favourites and not so favourites _____	95
Those with little or no access to their grandchildren	99
Individual grandchildren _____	103

Chapter 5: Views on Child-Rearing _____ 108

Parental approval _____	108
Disagreements on child-rearing _____	109
<i>Material things</i> _____	110
<i>The use of time</i> _____	110
<i>Other issues</i> _____	112
<i>Larger problems</i> _____	114
Offering advice _____	115
<i>Daughters and daughters-in-law</i> _____	119
<i>Changing views about managing children</i> _____	121
Looking after the grandchildren _____	123
<i>Spoiling</i> _____	126
<i>Involvement in discipline</i> _____	127

Helping with problems _____	131
<i>Issues or problems at home</i> _____	132
<i>Understanding themselves</i> _____	133
<i>Wider questions</i> _____	136

Chapter 6: The Image and Role of Grandmothers _____ 137

The image of grandmothers _____	137
<i>Own grandmothers</i> _____	140
<i>Own mothers as grandmothers and mothers</i> _____	144
Kinds of grandmother _____	147
<i>Providing childcare or not</i> _____	147
The many aims of grandmothers _____	152
<i>Supporting the parents</i> _____	152
<i>Helping the grandchildren</i> _____	154
<i>Fostering a sense of family</i> _____	157
<i>Long-term relationships</i> _____	159
<i>Financial involvement</i> _____	163

Chapter 7: The Impact on Other Relationships _____ 166

The son-in-law or daughter-in law (or partner) _____	166
<i>The good stories</i> _____	166
<i>Strained relationships</i> _____	168
<i>Absent partners</i> _____	172
The son or daughter with the grandchildren _____	174
The other grandmother(s) _____	179
Other children _____	184
Grandfathers and their role _____	187
<i>Absent grandfathers</i> _____	191

Chapter 8: Looking Back and Looking Forward _____ 194

Looking back on parenthood _____	194
<i>The regrets</i> _____	194
<i>Making amends</i> _____	196
<i>Proud mothers</i> _____	198
<i>Easier to be a grandmother than a mother</i> _____	200
Being part of a line _____	203
<i>Seeing a family resemblance</i> _____	203
<i>Family traditions</i> _____	206
Looking forward _____	210
<i>Hopes for the future</i> _____	210
<i>Concerns for the future</i> _____	214
<i>Being a burden</i> _____	218
<i>The fragility of life</i> _____	222

Chapter 9: Reflections on Being A Grandmother _____ 225

Finding the right balance _____	225
<i>Keeping the right distance</i> _____	225
<i>Having their own life</i> _____	226
<i>Moving to be near the family</i> _____	230
The status of grandmothers _____	235
<i>Feeling valued</i> _____	235
<i>Being a matriarch</i> _____	240
<i>Wisdom</i> _____	244
Missing out on the pleasures _____	247
End thoughts _____	249

Preface

This is a book about the lives and views of grandmothers, as told by grandmothers themselves. So, you might ask, who wants to read about a lot of wrinkled old ladies? Well, for a start, wrinkled old ladies themselves, who tend to be largely ignored in books and the media. Plus the not-so-wrinkled, since some women become grandmothers in their forties or even earlier and some, who are not yet grandmothers, have an interest in understanding the stage of life they will be reaching soon. Not to mention the occasional person who might like to know what that quiet woman in the corner seat is thinking about.

The main reason I wanted to write this book is because I have found being a grandmother fascinating. Not just fascinating, but completely and surprisingly so. I had no idea of the significance it would have in my life. My own grandmothers were moderately absent – one because she lived a long distance away and we saw her very infrequently and the other because she had only a very limited interest in her grandchildren. My children, also, had little involvement with their grandmothers – my husband's mother had died before they were born and my mother was a long way away and more engaged in her career. So, for me, there was no model for this stage in my life and certainly no very positive one.

Yet from the moment of birth of my first grandson, I felt immensely involved. I was keen to watch him – and the second, his cousin, who came along three years later – develop. I felt they were both very much part of my life and my planning. I did not want to go away for too long, because I wanted to keep up with changes in their lives. I not only adored them and the fun I had with them, but I liked the 'me' that I became with them.

Celebrating Grandmothers

I realised that it was much easier to be a granny than a mother and felt I was doing better at it. I probably became a bore to family and friends, talking about them and the funny things they said, although no one has ever told me so.

Yes, being a grandmother added a whole new layer to my life. But this was not solely due to the new members of the family to love and to worry about. There were also new territories to be negotiated, like when and how to offer advice to the parents without getting their backs up. As I took on occasional childcare, I had to remember both the practical and the more complex emotional sides of looking after them. And perhaps most surprising of all, I had to come to terms with a very new image of myself as a grandmother – the older generation, with all that this implies.

It seemed such an obvious focus for a book that I was surprised it had not been done before, at least in this way. I checked it out and found the occasional book by an individual grandmother and a considerable number of books offering advice, with various titles around the theme of how to be a good granny. Indeed, I found one enticingly subtitled ‘how to be a bad grandmother’. But I didn’t want to give advice – I wanted to show how it felt from the inside. Of course, there may be much to be learned from what these grandmothers have to say and different readers may take different messages from their thoughts. But my focus was on letting them talk about their lives.

This book is not about the grandchildren, no matter how many clever things they say or do. Evidently, some grandchildren, when they learned of this project, automatically assumed that such a book would be about them – as one teenage granddaughter asked ‘What do they want to know about *me*?’ The grandmothers themselves, however, had no difficulty understanding

Preface

that they – and their emotions – were the focus of attention, although some were keen to talk about their grandchildren as well.

As I was writing this book, one friend asked if I had a thesis – was there a particular point that I was trying to make, using the interviews to prove it? The answer is a resounding no. It was never my intention to prove anything, aside from the multiplicity of perspectives and experiences of grandmothers in different circumstances. I did not know what I would find when I set out, and can only say that I was delighted with the varied nature of the responses.

One question was how to find my grandmothers. When I first told friends that I was planning this book and looking for people to interview, more often than not if they were grandmothers themselves, they would say cheerfully ‘You could interview me’. But it is unprofessional to interview anyone you know, so I had to decline. I began by approaching people in a park and shopping centre and found two or three in this way. But I then discovered that while I could not interview my friends, I could interview *their* friends. So I asked neighbours about their friends and friends about their friends and neighbours. I asked people I knew from various activities I do and, on occasion, local shopkeepers. One woman phoned me and asked to take part without my ever knowing how she heard of the project. As I was very concerned to talk to people with a range of backgrounds, I always talked briefly to the women on the phone to learn something about them prior to the interview. This also, of course, gave them a chance to ask more about the planned book.

What can be said is that these grandmothers come in all shapes and sizes. Some are old, some are surprisingly young, some elegant and some struggling. In the end, we spoke to 27 grandmothers. All but one lived in

Celebrating Grandmothers

London (the exception was interviewed on a visit to London), but they lived in all corners of this diverse city – East, West, North and South London. We interviewed one living in Kensington (for those not familiar with London, this is one of the richest areas) and several in Tower Hamlets (one of the poorest). The majority were born in the UK – indeed, many of these were born in London itself – but because London is a very cosmopolitan place, a considerable number also came from elsewhere. Their countries of origin included, in no particular order, Australia, France, Pakistan, Iran, Nigeria, Sweden, Zimbabwe, Egypt and Barbados. They also spanned the major religions: Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu.

The ages of those we interviewed ranged from 46 to 88, but many had first become grandmothers long before – the youngest at age 36. They had worked in a myriad of occupations, including a former teacher, writer, postwoman, civil servant, child-minder, finance director, singer, and cleaner, to name some examples. A few had been housewives all their lives. Some continued to work. Some had only one grandchild, while some had grandchildren in high numbers, the jackpot going to a woman with eleven. The ages of the grandchildren ranged from a few months to age 29. Three were great-grandmothers and a couple of others had great-grandchildren on the way.

This is not, of course, a ‘representative’ sample, nor was it meant to be. There are probably surveys that can tell you the proportion of grandmothers who look after their grandchildren full-time or see their grandchild less than once a month. This was never the purpose of this book. Instead, it was intended to provide a sense of the texture of grandmothers’ lives – the complexities of their feelings and the diversity of their experiences. The same project, undertaken at another time or by another person,

Preface

would interview 27 completely different people. Their individual stories and the way they expressed themselves would clearly not be identical, but I suspect the general picture would be very much the same.

Interviews of the kind used for this book are very open and fluid – there is no formal questionnaire and no effort to put people's responses into pre-set boxes. Instead, there is a rough 'topic guide', developed in advance, that helps the interviewer to remember the range of issues to be covered. But essentially, each interview is a conversation and each invariably goes in a slightly different direction. Indeed, not every person is even asked every question. Sometimes, time runs out. A person might have a particularly compelling story to tell. Sometimes, we think of an interesting line of questioning only after the first interviews have taken place.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, that is word for word. It is this process that allowed me to use the interviews thoroughly. I read them over very carefully many times and then edited down the contributions so they were manageable to read. I made the decision to correct the English of those who were not native English speakers or who did not always speak grammatically, as I feel it gives people more dignity to be presented in this way. In all other ways, these are the words of the grandmothers themselves and many different voices can be heard.

Because the interviews were very intimate and open discussions, some grandmothers shared thoughts that they would not want traced back to them, particularly about relationships within their family. This caused me a dilemma in how to use the contributions without hurting the person – or their family – in any way. I had always said that no real names would be used. In the end, I decided not even to use pseudonyms because

Celebrating Grandmothers

those with very individual and recognisable stories might be traced through. Very occasionally, I have mildly changed certain details so that no one could be fully identified by family or friends. This may be annoying to the reader, who might like to note the thoughts of individual women, but it is a necessary protection to the grandmothers themselves who spoke with such honesty about their lives.

I am, of course, enormously grateful to my interviewer, Paul Vallance, who carried out the discussions with great sensitivity and skill. He had to respond quickly and thoughtfully to very different individuals and circumstances. A number of those interviewed commented subsequently on how pleasurable it was to reflect on the issues raised, some of which they had not directly thought about before. I am also grateful to my two transcribers, who had to listen to the discussions through the occasional veil of barking dogs, whirring dishwashers, local car alarms and the like, which seem to be much more of a distraction in a recording than in real life. I must also thank highly all the friends, acquaintances and neighbours who allowed me to pester them for the names and contact details of grandmothers they knew.

And most of all, I give tremendous thanks to all the grandmothers in this book, who dug deeply both into their memories and into their innermost thoughts about their current circumstances to recount a range of complex – often happy, but sometimes painful – experiences. The book could not, needless to say, have been written without them.

Chapter 5

Views on Child-Rearing

Being a grandmother almost always means watching how the children bring up their children. Grandmothers cannot help but notice and often have strong opinions. This can be the source of great pleasure, but it can also be a difficult issue on both sides. This chapter explores some of the complexities here.

Parental approval

It is the lucky grandmother who is wholly approving of the child-rearing of their children, but many do exist. Not only are they very positive, but they feel their children are doing much better than they did:

I'm hugely admiring of her ability to have the energy and the resources to do the things she needs to do, like instil the right level of discipline and support, draw the boundaries clearly and make sure the children are loved. If they don't do what they're supposed to do, both parents are extremely firm, they back each other up. When it was me, dragging my kids up, I just ran out of steam.

grandmother of two

I always thought she was a better mother – that's manifested in their very close relationship. I'm pretty sure they talk about everything, whereas my daughter and I do talk about everything now, but it was not so much when she was a teenager.

grandmother of one

This provides an opportunity to muse on the long-term effects of their own child-rearing:

Views on Child-Rearing

They listen well as parents. I was too busy. We had to run a very regimented house to allow everything to run smoothly. But my kids feel they had a happy childhood. And that's, perhaps, the most important thing – I hope their children feel the same. It's all you can give your children, really, is a happy childhood and happy memories.

grandmother of eleven

One mother comments with approval of her son and his partner's careful management of a complete separation and its effect for her granddaughter:

My granddaughter knew what was going on when they separated. Credit to them, they really negotiated that extremely well and there was no volatility. They lived ten minutes away from each other and remained parenting alongside each other very actively. My son was excellent in supporting her as a friend and co-parent, and making sure that his daughter was provided for.

I was hugely relieved that they were so communicative with each other, having known the opposite with the father of my children. So I really respected them enormously and admired them.

grandmother of three

Disagreements on child-rearing

But, of course, there are also many who note problems with the upbringing of their grandchildren. Many of these are relatively minor problems.

Material things

Perhaps the most common complaint concerns the amount of things their grandchildren have:

Sometimes I say that I think they have too much, too many material things. I tell the grandchildren that too. They often laugh – they know that Grandma just doesn't understand life today. When I had my children, we would discuss whether they *needed* something, not just getting it because they wanted it.

grandmother of eleven

I think they have too much – toys and stuff. In my day, you just had maybe a couple of toys. Their house is like one big playroom. He can't play with everything. You couldn't move for the stuff under my Christmas tree – and half of it she would find six months later, not even out of the wrapping. In fact, we found an old hair dryer and that's what that child plays with all the time. So, all these toys, I just think, why?

grandmother of eight

They all have far too much stuff. All my friends say that about their grandchildren. It's just ridiculous. I don't even give them toys anymore. I told my grandson, when it was his birthday, that I would only give them *experience* presents now, like taking them to the theatre.

grandmother of five

The use of time

As children grow older, television and computer games are another big issue:

One thing I find difficult is the way the huge screen television was on all the time in the living room – at meals, the girls would slip out to watch telly. I think it's a pity if that's allowed to happen.

grandmother of eight

The real tension is around screen time – iPhone, iPad, Minecraft and all this stuff they have. We took them abroad to a nice resort, and they just wanted to stay in their room and have screen time. It's almost like an addiction. You ask them to stop, 'But I have to get to the end of this game.' or 'I've got to get to the next level.' Everybody I know with kids of this age finds it's a huge problem.

grandmother of five

He wanted an X-Box for Christmas and of course he wasn't getting one, but he's got a DS, one of these little games. If I need to take the dog out, I'll ask him 'Fancy coming into my world?' and he'll tell me he just got onto another level. Once you get him out, he's fine, but they do get hooked.

grandmother of two

The issue is not simply about what the grandchildren are doing, but also about what activities they are then missing out on:

A lot of young parents are not talking to their children. There's too much reliance on the television and less *doing* things with them. I'd like to teach young people about how you should interact with children, but there's so much

resistance. It's so much easier to bring them up the way they're doing it.

People say that when many children go to school, they can't talk, they can't communicate, they don't understand a lot of things. So all those wonderful years for the children to become so solid and beautiful, you're wasting them in not talking to them! With my grandson, I'm practising what I feel.

grandmother of one

We found an old Scrabble set and I was teaching the nine-year-old how to play. I realised that, in between turns, he was playing games on his mini-iPad. His mother came in and got very cross, telling him he was being rude, and he said 'Well, it is a boring game, isn't it?' My sister told me that she *made* her kids play cards and they had a good time.

grandmother of five

Other issues

There are also other matters that can arise. Manners can be a source of annoyance to the older generation:

I just can't stand it when they eat like pigs at the table. Whenever the kids come down to visit, I think they must've had a big talking-to about manners beforehand. Once, when the parents were both at work, I asked the kids if they had finished their tea, and the little one said, 'Thank-you-very-much-for-my-tea-it-was-very-nice-and-please-may-I-now-leave-the-table.' He said it all like he'd been practising it for about two weeks.

grandmother of five

Strictness about food is another source of conflict:

There are so many things the parents do in a different way. Like food. In my view, your child doesn't like this thing, fine, give him something different. But my son-in-law is strict – he'll let them have only what is good for them, and thinks if we don't tell them now, they'll never learn.

I'm not in favour of forcing them to do this or do that and having the tears in the eyes. As they grow up a little bit more, slowly, slowly, you teach them and they will learn.

grandmother of four

Some grandmothers are concerned about too much hygiene, albeit for different reasons:

My daughter has lots of rules and regulations and she's really *fussy* about hygiene. I'm not a dirty person, but she wants everything meticulous, too clean – one little dot and she wants to change the baby! They want to wash the towels every day. It creates a lot of work.

grandmother of two

They are very fastidious about being clean. I do worry a bit, when I read reports about modern children being allergic to everything, because they're not exposed to enough dirt. I was raised in a medical family. My father said the dirtiest families in his practice were often the ones that had nothing wrong with them, whereas those who were clean went down with everything.

grandmother of two

Celebrating Grandmothers

Disagreements about child-rearing can be particularly difficult where the mother and grandmother live together, as noted by one great-grandmother:

My daughter's the mother, of course, but if I don't like what she's saying, I will say something. Like her son, I don't want him bringing girls back home all the time. I didn't allow my children to do that. I wouldn't like some boy to be doing that to my daughter or granddaughter. If I think they're being overly rude to their mum, I will speak to them.

grandmother of seven

Larger problems

All of these issues are annoying, but they are not fundamental to the way a child is brought up. A few grandmothers note more worrying problems:

My son can be so strict – there's no place for discussion, they have to listen, even when there is absolutely no need for a Sergeant Major approach. I find that difficult. I won't intervene because he would get really angry. He'd say that it's not my place to say anything and he can bring up his children the way he wants and so on – it's a bit upsetting.

grandmother of three

My daughter would love her children to be high achievers, but she has realised that her son is not as bright as she thinks. She's disappointed by it and the child feels it and wants to do the best for his mother. He doesn't want to do his homework, but he says he has to.

Views on Child-Rearing

I tell him to relax a bit, and he says ‘No, I *have* to!’ It’s torture to watch him. He’s had lessons in Kumon, he’s had lessons in French – he’s had lessons pushed down his throat because his mother wants him to be a high achiever.

grandmother of five

One grandmother describes the inability of her son, with major problems of his own, to care for his twins:

One time, we were in a café and he had the twins on his own –and they were wild. They were flinging off their snowsuits and boots going everywhere and we’re in a place trying to eat some pasta and it’s like ‘Oh, my God!’ Very difficult. With twins, they’re a unit – they know how to challenge, and they do it at the same time.

I didn’t think he could handle them and I was worried about their safety. He told me he couldn’t. He would sometimes ring me and say, ‘I’m freaking out, I don’t know what to do.’ He would be off his head on something and not paying attention. It was horrible.

grandmother of three

Offering advice

Both mothers and mothers-in-law are famous for trying to advise parents on their children’s upbringing. Sometimes, this is thought to be very welcome:

I didn’t want to be one of those grandmothers where she’ll get annoyed with me, and say, ‘He’s *mine*, not yours.’ I used to tell her to let me know if she felt I was trying to take over. But

Celebrating Grandmothers

she said I'd brought up three of my own and she loved my advice. Never once did she say, 'Mum, you're getting on my nerves,' because she knew that what I was telling her was for the best. Now she says she couldn't have done it without me.

grandmother of one

I'm quite easy-going and I realise that people have to make their own mistakes. They've both done things when I've thought, oh, that won't work, but you let them get on with it. I've got a good relationship with them and they do ask me what I think, like bedtime routines, or problems with weaning.

If they have any kind of problem, they usually ring me immediately – even now. I'm extremely lucky, because a lot of people don't have that with their kids.

grandmother of three

But grandmothers are well aware that their advice may not be appreciated and some do their best not to interfere:

Every grandmother has to be issued with a zip. There's a fine line between help and interference and you have to learn it. Nobody can teach it to you, because everybody's experience is different.

My mother-in-law was always so busy trying not to interfere that she wasn't actually much help. I used to say to my husband that we could do this or that if his parents would just have the children for two hours, but he didn't like to ask. We used

Views on Child-Rearing

to have to say, 'Shall we come over? Would you like to see them?'

grandmother of two

One of the interesting things about being a grandmother is that you would like to get your ideas across without them feeling you're criticising them. There's no point in putting their backs up, because then you won't see them at all and you won't have any chance to do anything.

I haven't interfered. If I had, my daughter might have got very cross with me, and my son-in-law just might not have wanted the mother-in-law around. I've got a strong personality and quite strong views about things, but it is *not* my role to impress those onto other people and the way they live.

grandmother of eight

You have to support the parents. If the parent says they are not to do something, then generally speaking, you should support that. Sometimes you have to be silent. There are times, particularly with the teenage girls, who are naturally rebelling where you don't always agree with the parents' attitude. That can be a bit hard – they've got their own reasons, but it's not the way you would've done it.

grandmother of ten

There's an unspoken, tacit contract that you absolutely don't undermine the authority of the parent. I don't want that authority, that responsibility. I want to be able to walk away. I want to know that the parents are absolutely in

Celebrating Grandmothers

control here. And they need the confidence to be able to carry on doing that.

grandmother of two

Much of the time, grandmothers tip-toe around the issues, trying to find the most sensitive way of expressing their concerns:

You make suggestions. When the baby wasn't sleeping, you'd say, 'Well, is she warm enough? Does she have a bottle before she goes to bed?' and things like that. You just try to make their life a little bit easier, but at the same time, they make their own decisions. I think that is important.

grandmother of one

I decided very early on that I'd only say something if I felt that what they were doing was actually damaging. If it was different from the way I'd do it, then I might say, 'I used to do it this way,' but I'm unlikely to say anything. My daughter-in-law made it clear that she wanted me to grandparent in the way that felt right to me. I thought it was very good that she said that.

grandmother of two

My daughter's not always easy, and I would say, 'Is it okay if I do this? Because when I had you, I did this, but I know that I haven't read all the books and you have.' These 30-something mothers, they have a whole library of books, how to get your baby to sleep, and don't do this, and do do that. For me, you just pick them up and feed them. I was working, you just get on with it.

grandmother of two

Views on Child-Rearing

And sometimes, not saying something is also effective:

I don't interfere, because I don't want them to hate me. I'm not a talker. I think it hurts them more when I *don't* talk, because they don't know what I'm thinking. When I go quiet, they know to keep away.

grandmother of ten

Occasionally, a grandmother will intervene more forcefully, rather than simply offering advice:

After the second one was born, I got quite worried for them. I can remember inviting myself over at tea time, because that was the worst time for my daughter. She wanted to spend time with the older one, but when you've got this screaming baby, it's not very easy. I used to sweep up the baby and take him for a walk – and walk far enough away that she couldn't hear.

She did say sometime later, 'You did that on purpose, didn't you?' And I said, 'Yes, because you weren't giving the older one enough time. It wasn't your fault, you had this screaming baby.'

grandmother of two

Daughters and daughters-in-law

Just as in pregnancy, giving advice is seen to be generally much easier with a daughter than a daughter-in-law:

People who have sons all feel that they are at a remove, because they're the mother of the

Celebrating Grandmothers

partner, and it feels more intrusive. You have to wait to be asked.

Daughters-in-law feel judged by their mothers-in-law. If the relationship is strong enough, it's all broken down in month four or five when the baby's screaming and the mother realises that any help is good help. But you have to go through that. Whereas, as a mother of a daughter, you pretty much can just walk in, but you've still got to be sort of egg-shelly with the partner.

grandmother of one

You've got to be particularly careful when it isn't your daughter. I don't want to fall out with my daughter-in-law. Her opinion is valuable and I have to make sure that that's appreciated.

I'm probably slightly more open with my son. I just say, 'What do you think – if you did this, would it be better?' I feel I can say it more easily to him than I can to her, although she's a really lovely girl. I don't want to be seen as interfering, I do understand that I have to take a back seat.

grandmother of one

This is a very sensitive area, where you tread very carefully! It's all about gauging what other people want and each family has been different. You're always on safer ground with a daughter. With our daughter, I always felt comfortable in giving advice, because she would ask for it. With the daughters-in-law, I think you're always slightly more uneasy.

grandmother of ten

There is a concern about the follow-on impact on the young people's relationship:

With a daughter, you can be more honest. With a daughter-in-law, you are worried about the relationship between her and your son, that it might cause strain between them. If you tell your daughter off, she wouldn't necessarily tell her husband about what you said, but a daughter-in-law would immediately go and tell her husband, 'Your mum did this' or 'Your mum did that!'

In our Muslim culture, a son-in-law has to be treated extremely well, because otherwise he's not going to treat your daughter well. So you have to be careful. I can't be bothered too much with that, but I do try to hold my tongue when my son-in-law's around.

grandmother of one

Changing views about managing children

Another problem is that many grandmothers realise that views about many aspects of child-rearing have changed since their time:

Things change. Like with the feed – we used to be able to make up the feed for the day, put them in the fridge. You can't do that any more because of the bacteria in the milk. When I had my first, it was lay him on his side, when I had my second it was lay them on the belly, put them at the bottom of the cot – it's all different. I did adapt, because maybe there's a reason for that.

grandmother of six

Celebrating Grandmothers

It's much more customary now for new babies not to sleep in their cots all day, but to be part of the family almost from the word go. You have to accept that things have changed. Just recently, they were popping their finger into the baby's mouth when she was crying and I didn't think that was hygienic. In my day, everything around a baby had to be absolutely sterile.

You don't know what they've been told at pre-natal classes or in their own reading about childcare. Maybe they've read that's an okay thing to do. You don't want to offend them.

grandmother of ten

The whole idea of safety has so totally changed. You can't just put your child in a chair that you hook on to the back of your car and go off somewhere – it's got to pass all sorts of safety restrictions. It would be considered strange to let your child out all day and not know what he was doing. All sorts of things, the whole thinking has changed.

grandmother of eight

While many grandmothers manage to adjust, others feel that they are considered very much behind the times:

Sometimes, when she's pulling her hair out, I'll say, 'I'm sorry, but I wouldn't do that. I'm going to tell you what I would do – and then I'll walk out and you can carry on doing what you're doing.' She'll say, 'It's not the same now.' You're instantly old-fashioned.

grandmother of two

Views on Child-Rearing

Some comment on how the climate for child-rearing has changed:

When my children were young, and indeed when I was young, there wasn't the emphasis on youth that there is now. Children were, quite often, 'seen and not heard', as they say. There was no adolescence as such – there was a transition from youth almost immediately to adulthood with responsibility and duty. Children were necessary and loved, but not made a great deal of.

Now, of course, we've almost gone too far in the sense that everything turns on children – perhaps we've gone a bit too far down that road.

grandmother of ten

Parenting is very different now. I think it's gone too far. Children now have too much choice. I can remember getting very cross with my son when he was young, shouting at him and insisting that he do what I said. Whereas the way that would be parented now is very different. They would not have nearly as much choice as children would have now. We would be the bosses and tell them what to do.

grandmother of two

Looking after the grandchildren

The question arises of how the grandmothers deal with their grandchildren when they are looking after them – in their children's ways or their own. Most say they try to fit in with what their children would like:

Celebrating Grandmothers

I clearly support everything her mother wants when my teenage granddaughter is rebellious, but she wouldn't really expect me to police it in the same way that her mother does. But if she said she's not allowed to do this, that, or the other, then of course I would honour all those rules.

grandmother of one

When they were small, I tried to keep as close to what they were used to as possible, so they didn't have many different regimes. They were being looked after by the other grandparents as well, so if we were all managing in totally different ways, they'd have three to contend with. And if you've got two parents, you've got two further ways of doing things anyway – I don't think you want six different ways of doing things.

grandmother of two

Some grandmothers sound as if they are almost frightened of going against the parents:

Being a grandmother, you don't have to make the decisions for them. If it's a serious decision, it's their mother who has to do that, not me. I can stand in the background and put my piece in and get shot down or not. They can come to me and say, 'Mummy said this' or 'Mummy said that'. I do try and back her up, because it's more than my life's worth not to! She's very sensible, so whatever she says is usually right.

grandmother of two

Because of the parents' strict views on sweets and biscuits, I wouldn't dare give the

Views on Child-Rearing

grandchildren any at all. But I've got a local shop where they make extremely delicious chocolate cupcakes and that's been allowed, as of about a year ago, but only for the oldest one. If we make cake for a birthday, we can have chocolate cake with good icing on top.

grandmother of three

Some say they do things their way as a matter of course:

I look after them my way, how I did mine. I said to their mums, 'If you don't like it, then I can't be looking after them – I have to do it my way.' But obviously, I will do certain things if they want me to do it for them.

grandmother of six

And some would check, if in doubt, with the parents:

It's a normal part of your interactions with small children that you say why this is a good thing or that's a bad thing. Why you should be nice to your sister or why you should forgive her for something. The parents do that as well. We're all involved in the same enterprise. I'm quite careful to say, 'You need to ask Mummy and Daddy about that' or 'Well, I don't think your Mum would like that and she's already told you off...'

grandmother of two

One grandmother notes that she will break the rules in a good cause:

Their mother has a rule that you never eat in front of TV and, at their home, it's in a separate

Celebrating Grandmothers

TV room. In my house, I follow the same rule, but if there's some very good programme on and my grandson wants to watch it, I'll take the food and I'll put it on his lap. So he knows that we are not rigid.

grandmother of two

Spoiling

Grandmothers are generally famous for spoiling their grandchildren and they don't disagree:

I probably let them get away with more than their parents do. It's so much easier – and you regard it as part of the grandparent's privilege that you are allowed to spoil them a little bit. You might let them have sweets more often than their parents would. Or you might let them get away with something.

It's only trivial things, really. Because it matters so much when it comes to morality and behaviour that the parents are getting it right – you have to support them.

grandmother of two

Aren't nannies allowed to spoil their grandchildren? I think so – a little bit. You tend to give in to them a little more than perhaps you do to your own children. Because you've not got the responsibility of bringing them up. So, where daddy might say no to her for biscuits, I might give her one. If she gets told off, she'll just run to me for a cuddle and I just cuddle her, whether it be right or wrong.

grandmother of one

Some suggest that spoiling is not really the right concept:

I don't like the word 'spoil'. I don't want to 'spoil' them. I'm aware that I could give them too many material things and I don't think that would help. I could spoil them by giving them too much time – that would be all right, that wouldn't be spoiling. It's not 'spoil' – you 'shower them with love'.

grandmother of two

How can you spoil your grandchildren? That's not spoiling them, that's loving them – and that's what grandparents are for. But they know they can't step over the line, I have my rules. They are certain things, like washing their hands when they go to the toilet. But, basically, I'm one of those nans who like to play.

grandmother of two

I certainly have been accused of spoiling – I'm sure my daughter has said it when her daughter was a lot younger, but I'm not sure it was totally true. If she would be difficult when she went home, it would be because I'd 'spoiled' her. But, in reality, when a child goes home, there's always a little settling-in period.

grandmother of one

Involvement in discipline

Some grandmothers instinctively avoid getting involved in disciplining their grandchildren:

As a grandmother, I would never, ever tell my little granddaughter off or smack her – I just

Celebrating Grandmothers

don't think it's my place to do it. If she was touching pans or light sockets, I'd stop her and tell her it was dangerous, but for telling her off, I'd let her mum do that. You see some grandmothers that scream at their grandkids and you think, 'Oh, that poor kid.'

grandmother of one

I don't punish her. My daughter would set the boundaries and if I was babysitting at her house, I'd say 'No, you know you're not allowed to do that'. She wasn't allowed to be totally cheeky or destructive.

grandmother of one

Some seem happy to tell their grandchildren off, but nothing more:

If I think they're doing something wrong, I'll tell them. And my kids are quite happy with that. They've even said that I should smack them, if I think they needed it, but I've never had to. And I don't get the nasty bits, they don't really fight or argue a lot round me. They might be scared of me, because I've got quite a deep voice. If I've said, 'Don't do it', they don't.

grandmother of six

I'm not afraid to speak my mind. I think the closer you are to your grandchildren, the more you can speak to them. If you talk to some, they'll take it as an offence, or their parents will. Like, why are *you* telling them that? That's my job. But the closer you are, they're like your own children, you can speak to them – there's more freedom.

grandmother of seven

Views on Child-Rearing

The grandchildren respect me, because if they're naughty, I'll just look at them, and that's enough – 'She's looking at us. Better behave yourself!' Just a look. They know where I'm coming from.

My upbringing in Barbados was much different from here. They could smack you at home, but they can't smack you over here, because the government says you can't smack kids, we'll put you in prison and all that. Over there, even the teachers used to smack us. And your parents would agree to it.

grandmother of ten

Some grandmothers set their own rules from time to time:

Just once, when she was about 14, I refused to take one grandchild out until she changed her clothes. What she was wearing seemed very inappropriate. I said, 'It looks like you've got your tights on, you haven't got a skirt on.' She said she didn't have a skirt she could wear, I said I wouldn't take her out then, looking like that. There were a lot of tears and shouting, but she did go up and get changed and we did go out. She's always a little bit of a rebel.

grandmother of eleven

Discipline gets complicated where families have differing views but spend a lot of time together:

My two-year old grandson gets away with a lot more with me than he does with his mum, because I just give in to him all the time, whereas

Celebrating Grandmothers

his mum doesn't. He's very boisterous and does naughty things, like chucking toys at my telly, and he gets told to stop, stop, stop. In the end, she'll put him on the naughty step, perhaps three times a week.

I have to keep out of the way, because he'll tell me he'll be good now and I want to get him off. He plays us off against each other. She says she can't give in, because when they go home, she's the one who's got to deal with him.

grandmother of one

My grandson is more relaxed with me and he never cries. I don't scold him much. He doesn't need it. He's a lovely little boy and he does listen. And when he's naughty, it's not serious naughtiness – he's making lots of noise and if you ask him to be quiet, he will give one loud bang, but he will stop.

I notice his mum and dad do tell him off. For example, his mum will say it's bedtime, but he wants to play outside. I'll let him stay that extra five minutes and say, 'Let him have a little more time. He likes to be outside.' But she'll say, 'No! Come in right now. You've got to listen to me!' They get a little bit of leeway from a grandmother.

grandmother of one

The occasional grandmother, however, is not so reluctant:

They've both felt the back of my hand, which I know you're not supposed to do these days.

Views on Child-Rearing

Only once, but they have now understood that if you make Granny really cross, she will slap you. Normally I do it with words.

I was talking with my son recently about parenting and he said they were really scared of me when they were little, but they knew where the lines were. I had to work and couldn't afford to have them running rings round me. I never belted them in cold blood or anything like that.

grandmother of two

Parents don't care for their children or grandchildren in this country. Caring is not buying them £100 shoes, it's making sure that they eat the right food, they do the chores, do what they are supposed to do. And if they do wrong, tell them off, but with love – not screaming and shouting at them.

You need to explain why you are telling them off and then they will learn. It's spoiling children to let them keep on doing naughty things. A smack will stop them from doing a worse thing tomorrow.

grandmother of three

Helping with problems

On the other side of the coin, grandmothers are often able to help their grandchildren with problems. They recount examples of how they have helped in different ways.

Issues or problems at home

Where there are problems at home, grandmothers are an obvious source of help:

The children will say ‘Daddy got angry’. The younger one tends to say it more spontaneously. The older one knows that there are certain things you don’t say, you don’t need to tell Grandma, you don’t need to upset anybody. But it just comes out. It’s usually the same type of thing, the parents’ arguments. They are upset and I tell them that they can come and talk to us anytime.

grandmother of two

I’ve had my grandchildren come and say, ‘My dad and mum won’t let me do this’. I’ll sit them down and ask them what happened – what did their mum say? what did their dad say? And if they said they couldn’t have something they wanted, like an iPad, I’d say, ‘Well, perhaps they haven’t got the money to get it. And maybe if you behave yourself a bit more and do what they ask you, instead of just taking things for granted, maybe you’ll get that thing.’

grandmother of seven

Or they are keen to be willing to be seen in this light:

I’m just part of their life – somebody they know loves them whatever they do. I’m not going to be shocked by anything. They know that whatever they tell me, it wouldn’t make any difference to me. I would help them. If it was something terrible – if they committed murder, I would help them. I would be horrified at what they’d done,

but I would still try and help and I would still love them because it is unconditional. That is what love is about, isn't it?

grandmother of two

Understanding themselves

Grandchildren of different ages may have a range of concerns and anxieties, where grandmothers can help:

Teenage children may not want to say things to their mum, which they may say to the grandparent. They tell me things, small things, like my granddaughter told me about how she's very upset over a friend at school, because she said something that made her unhappy. I asked her why she said it, maybe she had a reason. And then we talked and it came out who did what.

Later, I told my daughter and she hadn't known. Mothers are so busy in their lives, like we were busy with our lives, whereas we now have the time. My daughter didn't get cross, but said she would try to find a way of raising the issue.

grandmother of two

My 14-year-old granddaughter and I do talk. She quite often mentions that she's thinking about when she leaves home and what she wants to want to do. She asks me what I did when I left home, what I wanted to do and so on. That's quite nice, that she's interested in me as a whole person, not saying I'm old and unable to tell her anything. She'll tell me a bit about her friends, but she doesn't want to tell me about boys or anything.

grandmother of three

Celebrating Grandmothers

One entry into their world was a very significant conversation I had with my grandson when he was four. He was going through a stage of worrying that his mother would die – he asked me about death, he wanted to know what happens when we die. I said, ‘Some people believe we carry on and have a different sort of life after we’re dead, and some people think that we don’t – that we just die and then there’s nothing. And some people think there’s heaven.’

He was actually worrying not just about death, but about separation from his mother. He said, ‘If Mummy dies, I want to die at the same time’ and I tried to explain to him very gently that, as he got older, Mummy wouldn’t be the only force in his life, that he might have someone else he was very close to.

grandmother of two

I do tell them what I think about their choice of boyfriends. If somebody's not right, I will say they deserve better. I always say to them, 'Don't love a man more than you love yourself. Let them love you more and you won't get hurt so much.' I tell all women, fall in love, it's great, but please don't love them more than they love you.

grandmother of two

Sometimes, such concerns are of a practical nature:

Last week, I had my granddaughter with me and I told her all about periods. I explained to her what it was and all that. We were doing a

Views on Child-Rearing

biology lesson. Her mum may have told her, but I just asked her to remind me to discuss it with her mum, because they are due to go on a long trip 'We must tell Mum to carry some spare pads in case you start your period when you're away.' We can talk.

grandmother of two

Sometimes, grandchildren can reveal something even if they do not say it outright:

Once, my little granddaughter wanted to play schools and she was giving me a red circle, equivalent to a red football card. Every time I opened my mouth, it was wrong and I got a red circle and then I had to go to the headmistress and be told off for bad behaviour – and I hadn't done anything.

I thought about this afterwards and what it says about her experience at school. She loves school, but I think I was getting the shadow side of school – you have to do what you're told a lot and you might not like that too much. Because I was playing a new girl, I said I wouldn't come back to school tomorrow, I didn't like it here, and she said I could have a sweet if I would.

grandmother of two

Confidences are less common where there is infrequent contact:

They don't confide in me very much. I see them for short periods and I'm usually seeing them all together. One older one has been down here on her own and we've been out for a day to do

Celebrating Grandmothers

something together. I might find a little bit out about how she's living her life and what her boyfriend is, but on the whole, they don't confide in me.

I think it's partly because they're able to talk within the family, they don't need to talk so much to me.

grandmother of eight

Wider questions

Of course, not all questions concern deep problems. Some grandchildren simply like to ask their grandmothers about the world around them:

One of them come home from school, and she said, 'Nan, were you in the war? Can you tell me any stories about what happened?' Which I did. I was telling her about when we were in the shelters. And I told her about being on rations and we were only allowed about four ounces of butter a week and things like that. She wrote it all down, put it all into a story and she got a prize in school for it.

grandmother of seven

The older one went through a 'why' phase. 'Why are you driving home this way?' 'Because the road down there is going to be very busy today and I don't want to get stuck in the jam.' 'Why?' 'I don't really like sitting in traffic jams.' 'Why?' 'I can think of better things to do?' 'Why?' 'Have a peppermint. Shut-up!'

grandmother of two