Grandparent-grandchild communication in long-distance familial relationships

"Their needs are not the same as our needs, so let them face the new experience without us. But gladly the Internet is a good platform for us to keep in touch".

Introduction

Becoming a grandparent is an important life event according to some 70% or seniors and the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren is generally viewed positively by both generations (Quadrello et al., 2005). GP-GC relationship is close and affectionate. Grandparents give their grandchildren affection in form of trust, commitment, and control mutuality (Mansson, 2013).

In the era of increased mobility, many young people travel long distances in pursuit of education, employment or simply new experiences which results in a growing number of long-distance familial relationships. This creates a difficulty in maintaining contact between extended family members but various communication channels can enable this contact. As much as the use of traditional communication channels such as letters and postcards, or landline phone can increase the amount of interaction and fill in the communication gap, younger generations tend to rely on emerging technologies whereas older population groups tend to use them less frequently. This may create digital divide which means disparity between those who have access to and use emerging Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and those who do not (Quadrello et al., 2005).

Why is GP-GC communication important?

- ✓ Both younger and older individuals can develop better interpersonal competencies if they are able to negotiate a successful GP-GC relationship (Silvertstein & Parrot, 1997; Kornhaber & Woodward, 1985).
- ✓ In its context, the age segregation present in Western societies (Okraku, 1987) can be broken down.
- ✓ It can be valuable for grandchildren who can enjoy having the possibility of hearing stories about their families (Brussoni & Boon, 1998).
- ✓ There is substantial evidence that GP-GC relationship is crucial for older adults (Kivnick, 1985, 1988; Thomas, 1990). As their peer friends pass away, and they are less motivated or able to seek new relationships, the grandchild becomes the center for family pride and social life (Harwood & Lin, 2000).
- ✓ Increased longevity results in that the GP-GC relationships last longer now, with many of these relationships extending into the grandchild's adult life (Hodgson, 1998).

Did you know?

83% of parents, grandparents and teens think going online is a helpful form of communication

30% of grandparents, and 29% of teens say connecting online helps them better understand each other

40% of teens help their grandparents go online

25% of teens communicate with their grandparents several times each week through social media

70% of teens say the computer increases the quantity of their communication with family members living far away, and 67% say it increases the quality of those communications

Source: Connecting Grandparents and Grandkids Through Technology.

GP-GC communication channels

Some grandparents may become offended, when they realize that due to the "growing up" process their grandchildren devote them less time. **Accepting the use of technology** is often their one chance **for reconnecting and maintaining contact** with their grandchildren, whether it is because they are growing up, or live far away, etc.

Phone calls, text messaging, video chats, exchanging **emails**, and sending **postcards** or **letters** to grandchildren are the most common ways of grandparents reaching out to their grandchildren.

Technology improvement and the accessibility to digital devices (PCs, smartphones, tablets) provides **easier**, and sometimes more **affordable solutions** and tools for the GP-GC communication. Computer programs, device applications and social media tools such as **Skype**, **Facebook**, **Twitter**, **WhatsApp** are only a few examples of Internet-related phenomena, which can help **improve intergenerational communication**.

Even though both sides should evenly contribute in the GP-GC relations, it is the older grandparents who tend to have the bigger struggle with breaking the ice and getting familiarized with the new technology. This, however, is a bit different for the current generation of "new" grandparents, the younger **baby boomers**. They are **more acquainted with newer technology** and enjoy using it to keep in touch with their families.

Our personal experience? Ask us!

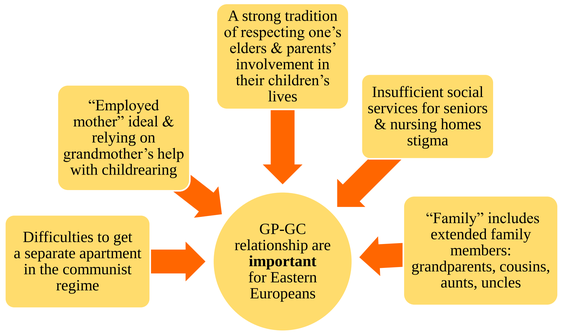
Challenges & opportunities of technology-based communication channels

Technology is able to link communication gaps between grandparents and grandchildren (Gonzalez, Jomhari, Kurniawan, 2012), especially in long-distance familial relationships. It allows grandparents and their grandchildren to spend their time together virtually (for example via Skype), it improves the family's relational dynamics (sending video / voice messages to keep everyone up to date with the new personal events), shortens geographical distance between family members, allows many parties to contribute to the process of mutual information exchange (other family members can contribute to the GP-GC communication process thanks to group chats, file exchanges, group video conferences, etc.) (Bangertera Waldron 2014).

Among challenges that may hinder the GP-GC communication are the lack of relational investment (from either the grandparent or the grandchild, or both), lack of free time, increasing independence of the grandchild (starting a new family, going to college, etc.), grandparent tech-resistance.

Eastern European Perspective

A particular kind of long-distance familial relationships are transnational families meaning families that maintain significant contact with two or more countries. Such is the case also with young educated immigrants from Eastern European countries where the grandparent-grandchild relationship is considered "a tighter knit" than in the US. Less interaction and connection with extended family is considered the biggest loss related to immigration.



These cultural values stand in contrast to the US concept of independence from one's parents and, in later life, from one's children. Immigrants wanting to assimilate in the new culture accept the norms of the host country but they often strive to retain their core values.

Major challenges to maintaining intergenerational relationships:

1. **Geographical distance between grandparents and grandchildren:** costliness of travel, cumbersome requirements to maintain legal status. Solution: grandparents taking turns in visiting Eastern European immigrants and staying for as long as visa allows.
2. **Linguistic distance:** English being the first language for second-generation immigrants and grandparents' limited ability to learn new languages. Solution: teaching children the native language (sometimes results in bilingualism).
3. **Cultural distance:** families of immigrant professionals do not exist in ethnic enclaves; it is a challenge to transmit the cultural norms and traditions from the immigrants' countries of origin. Solution: sending the immigrants' children to ethnic schools and arranging their frequent visits to their grandparents overseas.

First-generation Eastern European immigrants strive to cultivate their family's relationship with physically absent but psychologically present grandparents. GP-GC communication is maintained by teaching the children the immigrants' native language, exchanging visits by both grandparents and grandchildren, and communicating via telephone, email, text messaging, and traditional mail.

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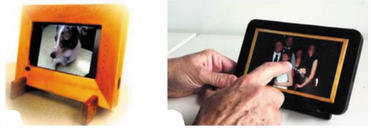
How to maintain healthy GP-GC relationships with use of new technologies?

- ✓ Try to **make it work,** make **adjustments,** constantly **learn new things** (if possible make the grandchildren teach new ways of communicating).
- ✓ Always have **a tool to stay in touch**, one which **works best**.

Take Me With You

> A shared adventure game focusing on collaborative play and connecting older generation with young grandchildren.



Families in Touch

Shared Stories

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