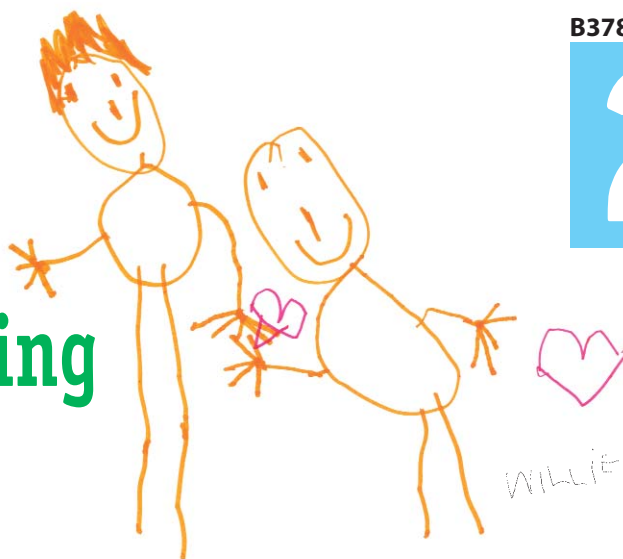*Through the eyes of a child*

# Grandparents raising grandchildren

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The importance of close relationships

How long do most grandparents spend raising grandchildren? According to the 2000 U.S. Census, close to 40% of grandparents raising grandchildren have been doing so for five or more years. Whether your grandchildren have been with you for a long or short time, you can have a strong influence on how they relate to others.

Children's relationships with parents and grandparents are very important to healthy development. Positive relationships are an important part of every child's development. This fact sheet describes the different types of relationships and explores the long-lasting benefits of healthy relationships.

Length of time grandparents typically spend raising their grandchildren.

- less than 1 year
- 1 to 2 years
- 3 to 4 years
- 5 years or more
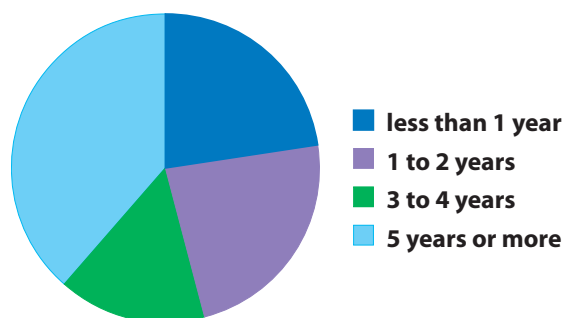
What is attachment?

Attachments are relationships that children form with the most special and trustworthy people in their lives. Although these relationships usually begin between infants and their parents at birth, attachments can form when children are older, too. The most common attachment is between mother and baby. However, the child could form an attachment with any person (including grandparents, aunts and uncles, older sibling, or babysitter) if the right type of care is given. By the time babies are 18 months old, they usually have formed attachment relationships with a few special people. In many families, these people are grandparents who are raising their grandchildren.

In addition to getting their basic needs met, children look for comfort, love, safety, and protection through their attachment relationships. Children are born ready to form a trusting attachment with a caregiver. However, the quality of the relationship that develops depends on how the child is treated:

- When adults treat children in positive and dependable ways, children develop healthy attachments.

- When adults treat children in negative ways, such as failing to protect them, not responding to their needs, or hurting them, children develop insecure attachments.

These early attachment relationships are important for a child's social and emotional development. Having an adult in their lives who gives them emotional and physical support helps the child develop a sense of security, comfort, and confidence. If there is no adult whom the child can count on, he or she may grow up not trusting in others.

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Characteristics of positive attachment figures

Most children have a few attachment figures in their lives. An attachment figure typically cares for the child physically and emotionally, is someone the child can count on, and has an emotional attachment to the child.[2] Most grandparents raising grandchildren meet these standards.

People who have a positive attachment relationship with a child share the following characteristics:

- Sensitive
- Loving
- Available
- Close by
- Stable
- Open
- Responsive
- Affectionate
- Trustworthy
- Consistent

Types of attachment relationships

Although most children develop several attachment relationships, the quality of these relationships may be different. Four types of attachment relationships have been studied: one is a secure type and three are insecure types. The secure attachment relationship is ideal for a child's healthy development. A child with an insecure attachment relationship may (1) avoid close relationships, (2) feel conflicted about close relationships, or (3) feel confused and fearful about close relationships. They are less healthy for the child. Each attachment style is explained more in the next fact sheet (#3: Relationship Expectations).

Developing attachment relationships

Understanding how children form relationships with others is important in helping children learn to communicate and behave. The following list describes the usual path children take when developing attachment relationships.[3]

1. Preattachment

- Birth to 6 weeks
- Babies are in close contact with caregivers
- Caregivers meet babies' needs for food and comfort
- Most babies do not get upset when left with a stranger

2. Attachment in the making

- 6 weeks to 6-8 months
- Children begin to respond to attachment figures in special ways (for example, a baby may calm down more easily for his mother than he would for another person)
- Late in this phase, children express distress with strange people and objects; they may cry or fuss if a stranger tries to hold them for the first time

3. Clear-cut attachment

- 6-8 months to 18-24 months
- Nearly all children have formed an attachment relationship by this time
- Children show great distress when their caregiver leaves. A child may cry or have a tantrum when her mom leaves for work or when left with a babysitter.
- Children find a sense of security from caregivers who respond with understanding, openness, and love

4. Reciprocal relationships

- 18-24 months and older
- If they have learned to expect comfort, safety, and love, children feel secure when the caregiver is gone for a short period of time
- If the caregiver is gone for long periods of time, children become very unhappy
- Children form other relationships based on these early relationships

What do healthy relationships mean for a child?

Many studies have examined children's attachment relationships and their effects on development. A good relationship with a positive attachment figure can have important, long-lasting effects on a child's development. A healthy relationship is shown to:

- enhance a child's pretend play,

- promote a child's healthy exploration,

- enrich a child's educational experiences in school,

- lead to healthy self-concepts and self-understanding,

- increase a child's confidence,

- increase a child's learning through experimentation,

- lead to positive relationships with friends.

Culture and attachment

Different cultures have different ways of raising children. In some cultures only the mother cares for the child. In others, many people in the community help out. Researchers have looked at the role attachment plays in different cultures. They have found that attachment relationships are important in most, if not all, cultures. All children in all cultures look for safety and comfort from a person or people who can take care of their needs. However, the ways that children and adults show their caring for one another is different between families and cultures.

Questions to ask yourself

- What was your relationship with your grandchild prior to the present living arrangement? How would you describe your relationship now?

- What does the child know about the situation (e.g., where his or her parents are)? How has it been explained?

- Is this a temporary or permanent change for the child? If temporary, how long will it last?

- How are you feeling about parenting your grandchild? Do you have someone you can talk to about your feelings?

References

[1] U.S. Census Bureau. Marital Status by Sex, Unmarried-Partner Households, and Grandparents as Caregivers: 2000. *Census 2000 Summary File 3 (SF 3)*, 2000.

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[3] Bowlby, J. *Attachment and Loss.* 3 vols. New York: Basic Books, 1969–1980.

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This fact sheet is part of a series. To obtain the rest of the set, visit the University of Wisconsin-Extension grandparenting web site at **www.uwex.edu/relationships/**. For more information about this series, contact Mary Brintnall-Peterson, University of Wisconsin-Extension or Julie Poehlmann, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

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