

Second innings in parenting

How would you picture the life of a retired couple? Quiet and slow paced. Morning walks, leisurely breakfast, regular siesta, visit to park/temple in the evening. Interspersed with the excitement of visiting children and grandchildren during the holidays and festivals.

Take a good look around and you will find the scene, at least in the cities, far removed from this idyllic picture. Today, post-retirement, most senior citizens are on an arduous eight-to-eight assignment, as child-care providers for their children's children.

"My parents are lucky!" A globe trotting professional told me, "They get to spend the whole day with my two children and my brother's kids."

My heart went out for the old couple! With the compulsion to conform to the image of 'loving' grandparents, I bet the poor souls wouldn't dare deny that they are blessed! For, like motherhood, grandparenthood too carries a halo and every culture has this pet notion that a grandparent's ultimate delight is being in the company of grandchildren.

Undoubtedly, being a grandparent is a wonderful privilege. Psychologists affirm that grandchildren provide us with a sensation that is as close as it gets to immortality. But then, to have fun and enjoy the grandchildren is one thing. Having to take on the complete responsibility for their care, all day, quite another!

Yet, in the modern times, more and more parents are readily and willingly taking on the demanding task of being day parents. Biologists see nature's hand and a hidden motive of the species in this! The long, post-fertility, grandma phase in humans is, after all, just to ensure stronger and greater grandchildren production!

A sociological motive is also cited as the reason why grandparents seize the opportunity to be with the grandchildren. The care period is the time when the grandparents get to forge family bonds and pass on family traditions and practices!

Aside these, there is the overt, practical reason.

Mrs S, who regularly baby-sits her grandchildren in the US for six months of the year, admits to it being "a very boring thing to do." "But," she asserts, "our presence certainly eases the stress on our daughter. She needs to work because there is the mortgage on the house. So why not make that small sacrifice? After all, we don't have any specific commitments here."

That precisely is the bottomline for most. Everybody agrees that financially and

emotionally, having a grandparent take care of young children is a far better option than hired, day care service. So the reward that grandparents get in the arrangement is not so much the happiness of being with the children. It is the satisfaction that comes out of being a part of the support structure. Parenting grandchildren gives elderly persons a greater sense of purpose in life.

In this win-win arrangement for parents and grandparents, how does the child fare?

It is well-known that a child's development and sense of security is enhanced by having as many positive, caring relatives and adults in their life as possible. So, having grandparents when parents go missing is a hugely stabilising influence on the child.

Children often take to grandparents because they are likely to be less judgemental than parents. Not having work pressure, grandparents are also in a position to be more patient and relaxed with the kids. As the grandparent/grandchild relationship is not as intense as the parent/child relationship, the bond is easier and kinder. There is less baggage, less complexity and altogether less anguish. With so many gains, psychologists rightly assert that no other relationship can do as much good to a growing child's psyche as the one with grandparents.

But there is also a down side to parenting by grandparents. Quite often, children raised largely by grandparents, recall growing up with a strong sense of restraint.

"One of my early memories is walking to school with grandpa," recalls Vikram. "He would have my bag on his shoulder and hold my hand tightly. We walked slowly and a whole lot of school children would overtake us. I would want to run and race them. But grandpa would never let go of the hand! In the evenings he would take me to the park. He would keep calling out to me asking me to be careful. Over the years, grandpa's fears got so deeply ingrained in me that I turned more and more away from play and towards books. The adventurous, robust phase never existed in my life."

Gayathri corroborates this. She was left with her grandparents while her parents were in the Middle East. "Grandma was so afraid of the 'responsibility' that she had me literally under house arrest! I was not allowed to go to friends' houses or even attend classes after school. I still feel my personality got stunted because of that and carry the regret."

Discipline is another area where grandparents' influence tends to be unfavourable. Quite often grandparents are lenient with grandchildren, and this makes the parents feel the children are being 'spoilt'. Sometimes children get smart and start to manipulate this conflict between the parents to their advantage, even setting the parent and the grandparent against each other!

As a precaution, family counsellors advocate that there should be firm agreements between the grandparents and the parents regarding the child's routine, disciplinary practices and the type and amount of supervision. The agreements might include everything from detailed information on acceptable foods to whether or not spanking can be used. Discipline is seen to be most effective if the grandparents' and parents' parenting and disciplinary practices are similar. This, perhaps, is the reason why the arrangement where the daughter's children are involved, works far smoother than when it is the son's kids.

Many a times, hiding behind the excuse of job pressures, young parents get selfish and exploit the goodness of the grandparents. Owing to cultural pressures, the overused grandparents do not voice their inability to cope and often end up suffering in silence.

This is not only unfair to the seniors, it also works against the interests of the child. Since physical age alone cannot be an indicator of the grandparent's capability, parents enlisting help must constantly be on the look out for signs of fatigue in the caregivers. If the elder is emotionally stressed at the end of the day or is irritable, yelling at or hitting the grandchildren, it is an indication that he/she has been over burdened.

Some tips for grandparents:

- * Remember that your responsibility is limited and it is ultimately the parents who are in charge. While you certainly can share your wisdom and experience, remember that your son or daughter will need to find his/her own way.
- * Stay open to new learning. Research is constantly expanding the base of knowledge about what is most effective. For example, recent research pokes holes in the old myth that you'll spoil babies if you pick them up when they cry. And, despite the longstanding popularity of spanking, research shows that other types of discipline are far more effective.
- * Stay curious and join your kids in learning all that you can.
- * When a child is diagnosed with some disability, learn as much about the disability as possible. Being informed will show you how to be involved.
- * Most importantly, be crazy about the child as only a grandparent can be! There is no greater gift you can give the child than to let him/her know that he or she is the sparkle in someone's eye!

A note for parents:

* Make sure that the grandparents do not suffer financially, physically or emotionally in the bargain.

* Take full day charge of the kid as often as possible. Or the emotional bond with the child will never get a chance to grow.

And, finally...

* Grandmas hold our tiny hands for just a little while, but our hearts forever.

* Grandmas never run out of hugs or cookies.

* A grandfather is someone with silver in his hair and gold in his heart.

* Grandfathers are for loving and fixing things.

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