

Five Tips for Grandparents of a Child with Autism

This is a post by Jane Springer, a Certified Life & Style Coach focusing on empowering people to move beyond life's challenges to live life on their own terms. Using her own experiences, she guides people to improved health, increased happiness, and enhanced self-confidence. She relishes her roles as wife, mom, step-mom and grandmother. Learn more at www.JaneSpringer.com.

1. Expect the unexpected – be prepared.

With a child with autism, you never know when something will throw them into a major meltdown. It can happen when you least expect it. Case in point. My grandson is in vacation bible school this week. At the end of the program, there were 300+ kids in the big church with a loud speaker leading the group in song. He had his hands up to his ears, which generally means there is too much noise or he is in unfamiliar territory. The leader said a prayer and then said Amen (Ahmen) He went into complete meltdown mode because he thought it should be pronounced Amen (long A). Tears and yelling. This is typical of children on the autism spectrum. So we roll with the flow as best we can soothe him with the words and actions that work the best in the situation and generally get him out of that space. Humor and making it a game occasionally works. It's best to have your "go to" bag of remedies ready in case an unexpected "crisis" develops.

2. Change what you can and let the rest go (a.k.a using the Serenity Prayer).

"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, The courage to change the things I can, And the wisdom to know the difference."



There have been many times in the six years since my grandson was born that I have wanted to offer my opinion on everything from the food he is being offered, to the vitamins he is taking or not taking, to his bedtime habits to potty training. Most of the time I have kept my mouth shut, because ultimately, unless he is with my husband and me, I have no control over any of these things. Worrying about it all doesn't do me any good, nor would it improve my relationship with my daughter, his mother. Yes, there are times when I gently offer my opinion or ask questions, and yes, my daughter gets impatient with me occasionally. But if I want a good relationship with his parents and want to keep spending time with my grand kids, I am very careful about offering my opinion. I concentrate on what I can do when he is with me. My ultimate desire is to have a close and loving relationship with the parents and my grandchildren. So sometimes, you just have to let it go...

3. Savor the moments and make memories.

My grandson is not particularly affectionate. From the time he was a baby, we waited for kisses and hugs. There were moments when I could get him to come into my arms, but I had made it into a game. But as time has gone on, he has gotten better about doing a half-hug and sometimes a kiss, but I usually have to ask. At some very special moments, he will get up into my lap or in my husband's lap (he seems to gravitate towards him for sitting together) and do a good snuggle. What I have learned is to stop, breathe and just take in the moment when he is snuggled, thank God for the moment, and consider it a memory I can cherish. His unstoppable giggling fits make me giggle, too. An offhand quirky remark I am not expecting can be another memory. Jumping the waves with him in the ocean or his first kicks in the pool without his "swimmies". These are memories one can tuck away to be savored later, especially when he is having a bad day or is in melt-down mode. You can call upon these memories and remember the sweet little rascal he can be.

4. Learn to love the quirks, work with them and use them.

My grandson loves elevators. He likes to know how they work, he likes the feeling of riding in them (especially the glass ones), and he loves to push the buttons. We have used this as an incentive when he balks at something that he needs to do or something we are trying to teach him (like potty training). I have even used it in a meltdown situation to change things up. It generally works like a charm. We have also used it as a method of teaching him his numbers.

In my experience, it is easier to work with the fixations, rather than forcibly try to ignore those quirks. I have even made an outing of it for him and a treasure hunt by going to mall and seeing how many elevators there were there. We had cookie time at the end of the treasure hunt. A fun day with Nana.

5. Be reliable and available, when possible.

It is important to be reliable and dependable for your own children and your grandchildren. Grandparents can play a key role in their grandchildren's lives and relieve the stressed-out parents. Nothing brings home the reality of what it's like to live with a child with autism than to spend time with them and it will give you a new appreciation for what the parents go through. Be there with your wisdom, guidance and presence, if at all possible. This does not mean, however, that you are at their beck and call. It is OK to have boundaries. Do not feel like you have to give up your own life to help them out. A grandparent who has his own interests and life is a happier grandparent. Your children will respect you for it and grandchildren will ultimately know that you offer them love, dependability and a soft, sweet place to fall.



Long-distance Grandparenting: 8 Ways to Stay in Touch with Your Grandchild with Autism

This is a post by Debora L. Smith, founder and executive director of Autism Resource Mom, a nonprofit organization in Southern California that provides support, guidance and hope to individuals on the autism spectrum and their families. She is the mother of a young adult with autism, and as such, is passionate about providing social opportunities for these individuals and informational workshops for their families.

We parents know the vital role grandparents play in the lives of our kids with autism spectrum disorders [ASDs]. They provide patience and understanding, unconditional love and in many cases they help with child care, finances and health care. Studies have even found that as many as one in three grandparents may have noticed autistic-like behaviors in their grandchildren prior to diagnosis. This additional support is invaluable to us.

But not all grandparents live close by. My folks are snowbirds from Michigan – fortunately for my son, they come out to California and live for three months in the winter. My son loves every minute of it.

Over the years, my parents have learned that their grandson requires a few extras from grandma and grandpa – like a mega-dose of perseverance and an uber-willingness to plan ahead to prepare him for what's coming next. And as they've learned about him and his way of being, it has been a special joy of mine to watch my mom and dad as they teach others about autism.

It should come as no surprise that researchers classify diverse forms of grandparenting that include everything from the mentor, nurturer and role model to the hero, playmate and wizard. And these classifications hold whether you live across town or across the country.

Those of you who are “long-distance” grandparents may think you play a lesser role, but that doesn't have to be the case.

Here are eight fun ways to stay in touch with your grand kids – you may be surprised to find that you'll be indirectly helping your children, as well.

SOCIAL SECURITY

If you feel secure enough to venture into social media, communicate using the Internet. Truly, it's not that difficult, as more than half of adults over 65 are online these days. From texting and email to Facebook [FB] and instant messaging, the opportunities are endless. My dad constantly comments on my teenager's FB posts and his encouragement has such a positive impact. You can also agree on a time to call your grandchild's cell phone-or simply call on the home phone-but schedule it. Make a big deal about it. Have “news” and questions ready for an older child; for a young one, keep it simple. And be prepared to listen.

YOU'VE GOT MAIL

Who doesn't love to get mail? Never underestimate the power of a good old-fashioned letter. It doesn't even have to be long – just a few sentences. I've kept some notes my parents sent to my son when he was younger, with pictures or comics they thought he'd enjoy. We treasure these! Postcards are fun, too. Send regularly just to say you're thinking of them. You can even send a packet of self-addressed and stamped postcards for the kids to write/draw on and send back to you.

WHAT'S ALL THE HYPE ABOUT SKYPE?

First of all, it's free! All you need is a computer and a webcam and you can place a video call. This beats the plain old telephone call any day because you get actual face time – and for families separated by miles, there's nothing better.

ONCE UPON A TIME

Every kid enjoys having a loved one read aloud his favorite book. This is not just for grandparents who live nearby. You can do this via Skype. Or you can record yourself (audio/video/both) reading the child's beloved story-and mail it to him, along with a handmade bookmark or a photo of you.

SHARE AN INTEREST, PERIODICALLY

Another way to thrill the grand kids with mail is to buy them a subscription to a special magazine – and ask them to call, Skype or email you each time a new issue arrives. Invite them to tell you about the page they liked best.

PICTURE THIS

Send a disposable camera and ask your grandchild to take pictures of herself, her family, friends, pets and favorite things to do. Get the parents to mail the camera back to you. You can develop the photos and make a little album to send as a gift-or bring it with you on your next visit. You and your grandchild can spend time together while she explains each photo.

CELEBRATE THE DAY

Nowadays there's an "awareness day" for practically everything. Did you know that June 21 is National Flip Flop Day? Bet you didn't know that July 28 is National Day of the Cowboy! All it takes is knowing what your grand kid likes and this website address: <http://www.national-awareness-days.com> and you'll be "in the know." Share this site with the parents and get their input. Your grand kids will be delightfully surprised and they'll be left wondering, "How did Grandma know...?" when you send them a card or email noting the special day. Or kick it up a notch and send your grandchild a copy of "*Matilda*" by Roald Dahl on September 13 – Roald Dahl Day, of course!

SAY CHEESE!

Every time you are together with your grandchild(ren), take lots of photos, for sure, but always take a certain identical pose. For example, a picture of you and your grandchild sitting together reading, talking, eating, laughing. Whatever. The child will always know what it looks like to be with you. Frame the photos so they can surround him. If you do this each time you're together, the child will "grow up with you" in the pictures. Both you and he will enjoy them.

Down the block or thousands of miles away, we couldn't do it without you – the mentors and nurturers, role models and heroes, playmates and wizards. Nana and poppa, gram and gramps, whatever you are called, you are a wonderful asset in our lives. From the bottom of our hearts, we thank you for everything.