Twenty Ideas for Grandparents

FYI Favorites from Grandparents and Research

By Kara Powell

“We can’t out-teach what you teach at home. We’re not that good.”

This warning from student ministry pastor Dr. David Fraze to the parents of his congregation during a recent sermon captures the impact parents have on their children’s faith formation. As a Sticky Faith Cohort church, Fraze is highlighting for his congregation what research consistently indicates: teenagers’ faith tends to mirror the faith of their parents. And their grandparents.

In the midst of our Sticky Faith research and resources, we at FYI are becoming more and more interested in understanding and maximizing grandparents’ impact on teenagers. Part of that is because of how many grandparents show up at our Sticky Faith events, just as eager for ideas to help build faith in kids as parents.

More Involved than Ever

But even more important is some recent research highlighting the enormous impact of grandparents on this generation of young people. Consider the following data from Dr. Vern Bengtson from the University of Southern California:

- Senior adults’ health is improving and their life expectancy is increasing.
- Grandparents have new ways to connect with their grandchildren through technology like Skype, Facebook, and texts.
- As more and more parents (including mothers) are working outside of the home, grandparents are providing more after-school care.

As a result of these and other cultural factors, Bengtson and his team conclude that “Gen Xers and Millennials will have greater involvement with their grandparents…than any previous generation of grandchildren in American history.”

Involvement = Influence

That involvement translates into religious influence. According to Bengtson, grandparents can take one of three paths in...
their religious influence:

1. Grandparents can reinforce the parents' religious influence,

2. Grandparents can substitute for the parents' influence, or finally

3. Grandparents can subvert the parents' influence.

As the second and third paths indicate, sometimes the faith of grandparents actually "skips" a generation as grandchildren end up following in their faith footsteps despite parents' choices to walk away from faith.

**The Power of Your Story**

Other recent research highlights the unique power of family stories.

If we could sit down over coffee, I might share with you about my grandfather's garbage disposal that created a cascade of garbage in their backyard. Or the time my mom cheated my dad out of the last piece of See's candy. These were some of my favorite stories growing up. I loved hearing them—again and again.

I'm not alone. Most kids love hearing stories of family members' past experiences. Recent research indicates that children who know more about their family's narratives also tend to do better emotionally. Here's a description of some recent findings described in a *New York Times* article:

The more children knew about their family's history, the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem and the more successfully they believed their families functioned…

(Researchers) developed a measure called the “Do You Know?” scale that asked children to answer 20 questions. Examples included: Do you know where your grandparents grew up? Do you know where your mom and dad went to high school? Do you know where your parents met? Do you know an illness or something really terrible that happened in your family? Do you know the story of your birth?

As it turns out, the “Do You Know?” scale was the best single predictor of children's emotional health and happiness in their study. Knowing a family narrative is also linked to positive identity formation and kids' ability to show resilience toward stress.

Given our Sticky Faith findings about the power of intergenerational relationships, our team was especially struck by this conclusion: "Dr. Duke said that children who have the most self-confidence have what he and Dr. Fivush call a strong 'intergenerational self.' They know they belong to something bigger than themselves."

Now let's be honest. Who knows family stories better than grandparents?

**Twenty Best Ideas**

To help families and leaders leverage the influence of grandparents, with the launch of Sticky Faith FYI decided to ask grandparents who are part of the Fuller community and walking this Sticky Faith journey to share their best ideas to build Sticky Faith in their grandkids. We originally posted over 40 ideas but we've distilled the list to 20 FYI Favorites for grandparents.

On a personal note, I don't remember the last writing assignment that has brought me to tears as many times as this article has. Maybe it's because my own grandparents were part of the village that raised me. Perhaps it's because Dave and I feel so blessed by the way our parents are investing in our three kids' lives. Or maybe it's just because I have a soft spot for connecting kids and senior adults.

Whatever the reason, we hope these ideas are a catalyst to help you live out the wise words of one grandfather we interviewed: "The bottom line is TIME—our grandkids just want to spend time with us."

**Ideas that can be done any day, any time**

- Invite your grandchildren for individual “sleepovers” at your house. While they are over, do some of their favorite activities together.
- Pray with your grandkids. As you pray, thank God for the special qualities he has given them.
- Teach your grandchild a new skill or one of your favorite hobbies, e.g. fishing, skiing, bicycling, jewelry making.
- Let your grandchild teach you a new skill or share a hobby with you.

http://fulleryouthinstitute.org/articles/twenty-ideas-for-grandparents
Twenty Ideas for Grandparents

- Enter a race and run/swim/ride or walk it with your grandchild.
- Talk with your grandchild about a family tradition that you enjoyed with your own grandparents and/or parents, and have passed along to your children. Then continue that tradition with your grandchild. Examples could include seeing fireworks together or going to a parade, having campfires and roasting marshmallows on the beach, seeing the Nutcracker ballet or making tamales during the Christmas season, or riding bikes to a favorite ice cream place.
- Bring out photo albums and talk about when your grandchild was born, how you prayed for them even before they were born, how excited you were to first hold him or her, and how blessed you feel that they are now part of your family.
- Serve together at a local ministry.
- Cook with your grandchildren. Play loud music and sing and cook (maybe even dance) together.
- Build something with your grandchildren.
- Share times when you have blown it, or disobeyed what you sensed God was telling you to do. Let them know how glad you are that Jesus is bigger than any mistakes.

Ideas for grandparents who live far away

- Choose a book series to read with your grandchildren. Read to them using Skype, or as they get older and the books get longer, read them individually and then discuss the highlights of the book by phone.
- Have breakfast together once a week using Skype or FaceTime.
- Start a collection of something with your grandchild, e.g. dolls from other countries, interesting stones, coins, colored glass, and continue adding to the collection when you travel or when you are together.
- Text them on an ordinary day and let them know you're thinking about them.
- Call or send a letter when kids have special events or milestones at school or church. For instance, while you may not be present for a baptism, calling your grandchild on that special day is still very memorable. The same can be true of soccer tournaments, school plays, or after a church retreat.

Ideas for vacations or extended time together

- On extended family vacations, try to have morning or evening devotions that include questions that all family members can answer. This way the children hear their parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins share on a deeper level.
- If financially possible, at the age of 12 or 13, take your grandson/granddaughter on a weekend away with the other significant males/females (of the same gender as your grandchild) in your family, e.g. dad, mom, aunts, uncles, grandfather and grandmother. Have a planned activity that you'll do together (skiing, hiking, going to a Broadway show, camping, etc.). Include time to discuss what it means to be a Christian man/woman. Give them something lasting that will remind them of things learned over the weekend and commitments that are made.
- Have “Grand Camp” with your grandkids either at your house or another destination. Do things together that they'd do at camp—crafts, sports, singing, cooking, treasure hunts, etc. This could last one day or several days. Or find a camp that hosts weeks for grandparents and grandkids to come together, letting the camp plan the programming and details.
- Go on a mission trip with your grandchild, either locally or abroad. Consider making this a rite of passage experience at a certain age with each grandchild.

Action Points:

1. If you're a grandparent, which of these ideas inspires you in your own relationship with your grandkids? If you're a parent, which of these ideas might fit your extended family?
2. If you're a youth leader, how can you facilitate relationships between teenagers and the senior adults in your church? Which senior adults could you meet with in the next few months to start brainstorming?
3. If you're a senior adult who doesn't have grandkids, or whose grandkids live far away, which of these ideas could you implement with kids in your church or neighborhood as a grandparent-figure in their lives?

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