



## “Grandparenting” today

**B**eing a grandparent is a role that many seniors will enjoy sooner or later. Most grandparents in Canada today describe their relationship with their grandchildren as warm, close and very satisfying. Grandparenting is a very different role than parenting, and becoming a grandparent changes the relationship with our own children and parents, others’ perception of us and our own self-perception. It’s an evolving role. Sure, grandparents today are like their own grandparents in many ways – but they’re also different in important ways.

This issue of *Expression* explores the major social changes such as the

integration of women in the labour force, distance, divorce, remarriage, reconstituted families and international adoption that have seriously altered the classic family structure and the challenges of grandparenting.



Grandparenting today requires an open mind and a willingness to adapt to evolving family relationships, children’s interests and communication tools. The effort is worth it. Not only does being a grandparent offer self-growth and enjoyment, it also contributes to the well-being of families and to the stability of our society.

**Gilbert Barrette**  
NACA Member



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## ■ Today's new grandparents

They're a diverse group, healthier and more active than previous generations – more likely to be found in jeans, playing ball hockey with their grandchildren, or deeply involved in their careers. With time of course, the picture transforms and evolves. Every age brings new challenges and rewards.

### Some facts

- There are 5.7 million grandparents in Canada, with an average 4.7 grandchildren each (2001 Census).
- The median age for entry to grandparenthood is now about 55.<sup>1</sup>
- Nearly two-thirds of women and more than half of all men aged 55 to 64 are grandparents.
- Among seniors (aged 65+), 80% of women and 74% of men are grandparents.
- 35% of grandparents in shared homes (with their children or other generations) are the financial providers.
- Over 1 in 10 grandparents in shared, multigenerational households live without a middle generation (parent generation).

## ■ Important changes

Being a grandparent today is different from what it was a generation ago. Increasing life expectancy, decreasing fertility, chosen delays in child-bearing, high divorce rates, changing gender roles, the career aspirations of recent generations of women, and increased ethnic diversity and inter-marriage between ethnic groups with different child-rearing cultures are having quite an impact on the role of grandparents.



1. Schlesinger, R. A. and B. Schlesinger, "Grandparents and Adult Grandchildren: Roles and Influences," in *Transition*, vol. 34, no. 3, Autumn 2004.



## Health

Because of improvements in life expectancy and health, grandparents can now play a larger part in their families' lives. In fact, most women, who can now expect to live to be 82 years old, may well spend close to half their lives as grandmothers. Grandfathers, too, are living longer. And more grandparents can expect to become great-grandparents than ever before. In addition to living longer, more older adults are now living disability-free. While a century ago, grandparents could expect to spend only 10 years with their grandchildren, today's grandparents and grandchildren can expect up to 20 years together.

## Lifestyle

Seniors today have different lifestyles than in the past. More grandparents are likely to be employed: the ranks of working seniors rose from 255,000 in 1996 to 305,000 in 2001 (see *Expression* 18-1 on "Seniors at work"). At the same time, the massive entry of women into the workforce through the second half of the last century means that more grandmothers, usually younger than their spouse, are still in paid employment, "and short on time to babysit and bake cookies." **Peggy Edwards** and **Mary Jane Sterne**<sup>2</sup> observed that men's experience has been subtly different: the trend toward earlier retirement has given men today more time for grandfathering than previous generations. Today's grandparents may also have a wider spectrum of interests, more energy and more ability to share a greater variety of experiences with their grandchildren.

## Family structure

With 16 percent of children in Canada living in single-parent households, it is becoming more common for grandparents to act as "back-up" parents to fulfill a necessary stabilizing role, especially for teens in volatile situations. And with a 40 percent divorce rate, there is an increased prevalence of the "blended family" – when single parents find a new partner with children of their own, creating a large extended family with as many as eight sets of grandparents and sometimes multiple sets of great-grandparents.<sup>3</sup> Adoption (by infertile or same-sex couples), inter-ethnic and interracial marriages, and wider gaps between generations (due to delayed childbearing) are also changing the experience of grandparents.

## ■ Challenges in grandparenting

Some of these recent changes in Canada's work and family structures are the source of new challenges for today's grandparents. They often require energy, openness, acceptance and a capacity to adapt.

## Working grandparents

The simple fact that many grandparents work has radically affected the standard stereotype of grandparents as doting and always available. Career moves that take families to distant places also alter the picture. Today's grandparents and their children need to adapt their image of grandparenting to the realities of today.

2. Edwards, P. and M. J. Sterne, *A Boomer's Guide: Intentional Grandparenting*, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 2005.

3. Kemp, C. L., "The Social and Demographic Contours of Contemporary Grandparenthood: Mapping Patterns in Canada and the United States," *SEDAP Research Paper No. 62*, October 2001.



Expectations need to be relaxed and new means of communications explored for all to enjoy the benefits of that special relationship.

### **Sandwich generation**

The “sandwich generation” usually refers to those who are caring for aging parents while at the same time raising their own children. This trend is increasing as a result of delayed childbearing by the baby boomers and the increasing longevity of seniors. A new “sandwich” trend has now emerged: increasingly, grandparents experience a “cluttered nest” rather than an “empty nest” syndrome, when adult children return home, sometimes with children, while they are caring for their own aged parents.

### **Access to grandchildren**

The high rate of divorce in Canada can put a severe strain on grandparents. “Grandparents of the custodial parent enjoy increased involvement with grandchildren, while grandparents of the non-custodial parent are at risk of diminished or denied contact...”<sup>4</sup> Many grandparents experience ongoing difficulties accessing their grandchildren. It’s a common enough experience to spawn a number of grandparents’ rights groups. And while British Columbia, Alberta, Quebec and New Brunswick have laws recognizing the rights of grandparents to have access to their grandchildren, other Canadian jurisdictions do not.

“Grandparenting is not for sissies.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Step-grandparenting**

Another source of stress for some grandparents can occur when they or their children re-marry, and they find themselves “instant step-grandparents,” often with older children. Sometimes, the birth family can view the “new” grandparents as interlopers. In addition, the children now have a larger number of grandparents, which can raise emotional issues for them – as well as for the grandparents. On the other hand, in a well-managed situation, this extended family can provide grandparents and grandchildren with that much more love and care!

### **Diversity**

The increasing diversity of Canadian society has brought many grandparents much closer to other cultures than they may have anticipated, particularly when their children marry people with different cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds. While this can be a source of stress for some, it can also be



4. Atkinson, J., “Grandparent Access to their Grandchildren: A Contemporary Issue,” *Fathers for Life*, Ontario, Canada: 1999. Online: [www.fathersforlife.org/families/grndpnf.htm](http://www.fathersforlife.org/families/grndpnf.htm)



a culturally enriching experience, enabling grandparents and grandchildren to learn about other faiths and cultures. The increase in the numbers of same-sex couples who raise children can have a similar impact.

### Generation gap

Stress may result from radical differences in values between generations. These differences can be manifested in lifestyle choices and decisions in child-rearing (e.g. gift-giving/spending, diet, religion, etc.). To avoid tensions, grandparents should let go of the need to be in control or to be right. They should consider setting an example by showing respect and support for the parents – while at the same time liberating themselves of the responsibility for the success and happiness of their children’s families.

On the other hand, children may benefit from learning that they live in a diversified society, and that different households may have different rules. To keep relations harmonious, grandparents and their adult

children need to negotiate boundaries that would best benefit the grandchildren.

### Grandparents raising grandchildren

Increasing numbers of Canadian grandparents are raising grandchildren, either with the parents or by themselves. The 2001 Census reports that 57,000 grandparents were raising their grandchildren on their own, a 20 percent increase over the previous decade. Two-thirds of these grandparents were women, and half the children they were raising were 14 or younger.<sup>5</sup>

Studies in Canada and the U.S. have found that grandparents raising grandchildren have higher rates of depression, fatigue and other health problems compared to others their age.

Often, these “skip-generation” families – those with grandparents and grandchildren, but without the parental generation – are struggling financially. **Grand-Parenting Again**, a volunteer support group for

### Are you raising your grandchildren?

- You can claim the *Eligible Dependant or Equivalent to Spouse Credit* on your income tax return, worth about \$6,500, as long as no one else is claiming a deduction for the same child under the age of 19.
- If you are in paid employment, you may be able to claim child care expenses such as daycare, if no one else is.
- You may also be eligible for some financial aid at other government levels. For example, **Ontario Works** provides monthly support payments for children, plus benefits for prescriptions, dental and vision care, even back-to-school or winter clothing costs.

*For details on your eligibility for tax deductions, contact the Canada Revenue Agency, [www.cra-arc.gc.ca](http://www.cra-arc.gc.ca). For information on provincial, territorial or municipal support programs, contact those program providers.*

5. Stepan, C., “Seniors are becoming moms and dads again,” *Hamilton Spectator*, December 11, 2003.



grandparents raising grandchildren, reports that up to 85 percent of their members are under severe financial strain, and many have to rely on food banks.

## Aging

The biggest challenge has never changed: the aging process *does* affect grandparenting. As grandchildren develop from infants to toddlers to preteens to adolescents and finally adults, the types of interactions they have with their grandparents evolve. And as grandparents get older, they may eventually become more reliant on their children and grandchildren, moving to the “cared-for” side of the generational layers. This brings up a whole new set of challenges for all members of the family.

## ■ A complex role

Being a grandparent has always been a complex social role, and any changes and stresses in the family situation or the relationships involved only make it more complex and varied.

## Relationships

The role of the grandparent is one that can involve a whole lot of people, including family members, in-laws, ex-partners and ex-in-laws, step-children, etc. The complexity of all these relationships makes grandparenting quite an art. **Rosenthal** and **Gladstone** have observed that “the realities of grandparenting lie on a continuum and shift in more than one direction as events

and people move through time”.<sup>6</sup> Family and personal crises can create new needs, expectations and relationships that may affect the role or influence of grandparents.

## Stability and help

Most grandparents see their role as “helpers” in the family. They’re back-ups to parents, good-willed babysitters and storytellers. For their children and grandchildren, they represent social and emotional stability, particularly when family stability is threatened by divorce or other crises.<sup>3</sup>

Grandparents don’t wish to be perceived as more than occasional caregivers, but they’re willing to become caregivers if it’s required. They also don’t want to appear meddling or interfering in their children’s or grandchildren’s lives. It’s best for all concerned to be clear about expectations and for grandparents to find a comfortable balance between non-interference and meeting family obligations.<sup>1</sup>

“If you can keep in touch with young people, it will rub off on you... My grandchildren will come down tonight – three of them... I will change and I will be laughing... I think it keeps you young. But some people don’t have grandchildren, and I say there is a certain amount of luck in life.”

— 66-year-old grandfather

6. Rosenthal, C. J. and J. Gladstone, “Grandparenthood in Canada,” Vanier Institute of the Family, Ottawa: 2000.

7. Connidis, I. A., *Family Ties & Aging*, Sage Publications, 2001.



## ■ The need to adapt

While grandparenting has been changing with the times, its importance and necessity have not. For that role to be relevant, grandparents wishing to stay “connected” need to strike a balance between the “traditional” activities associated with grandparenting – telling stories, identifying people in family photographs, organizing family dinners, teaching children the rudiments of fishing, sewing, playing chess – and the “new” context of their grandchildren’s lives.

## ■ A rewarding role

There’s no doubt that being a grandparent is worth it. Grandparents almost universally report an enhanced sense of well-being from the relationship with their children and grandchildren. In several studies, grandparents report great satisfaction in being a resource to grandchildren, able to pass on knowledge, skills and family stories. Being around their grandchildren gives them a sense of continuity, a sense that they have contributed to life and continue to do so.<sup>8</sup>

The challenges of grandparenting have evolved but facing them brings great rewards. In our fast-moving

## Tips for today’s grandparents

- **Establish your role as a grandparent.** Consult and negotiate with your adult children (parents of your grandchildren) regarding their expectations of your role as a grandparent, as well as your own. Supporting the parents’ values and decisions will allow you to be more involved in your grandchildren’s lives.
- **Mentor your grandchildren.** Be prepared to talk about lively, interesting and even difficult topics. Introduce them to new things and places (museums, trips, etc.). Teach them the rudimentary skills they’re less likely to have acquired (woodworking, baking from scratch, gardening, fishing, sewing, etc.).
- **Engage your grandchildren.** Listen to them; tune in to their interests (TV shows, hobbies, books, heroes, etc.). Invite them to plan family events and gatherings with you and decorate your home and garden. Seek their input on films to see, or on computer tips.
- **Be there for your grandchildren.** If you’re within reasonable distance, be there in body by attending their special events with school, church and extra-curricular activities, and be there emotionally for them when they need someone to listen and to support them.
- **Be fair with your grandchildren.** Being fair doesn’t necessarily mean treating each grandchild the same. Be fair by accepting each grandchild’s uniqueness, family situation and needs at different times in his/her life.
- **Keep in touch with your grandchildren.** While mail and phone calls are still a good means of communication, bear in mind that today’s grandchildren were born to computers. Keeping in touch with them (especially over long distances) has never been easier with the help of the Internet, e-mail, videocams, and chat rooms. Learning to use these communication tools will not only show your grandchildren that you care, but that you’re also a modern grandparent!

8. Walker, A. J. et al., *Families in Later Life: Connections and Transitions*, Pine Forge Press, 2001.



society, the place of grandparents as sources of grounding and support may be more crucial, and more satisfying, than ever before. ■

## For more information...

### Vanier Institute of the Family.

For information on contemporary family trends in Canada. Online: [www.vifamily.ca](http://www.vifamily.ca)

### National Advisory Council on Aging.

“Seniors at work,” *Expression*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2005. Online: [www.naca-ccnta.ca/expression/18-1/exp18-1\\_toc\\_e.htm](http://www.naca-ccnta.ca/expression/18-1/exp18-1_toc_e.htm)

“Successful aging,” *Expression*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2004. Online: [www.naca-ccnta.ca/expression/17-4/exp17-4\\_toc\\_e.htm](http://www.naca-ccnta.ca/expression/17-4/exp17-4_toc_e.htm)

“Reconnecting the Generations,” *Expression*, vol. 11, no. 4, 1998. Online: [www.naca-ccnta.ca/expression/11-4/exp\\_11-4\\_e.htm](http://www.naca-ccnta.ca/expression/11-4/exp_11-4_e.htm)

**Edwards, P. and M. J. Sterne.** *A Boomer’s Guide: Intentional Grandparenting*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 2005.

**Lamontagne, L.** « L’art d’être grand-parent » *Virage*, vol. 6, no. 3, Spring 2001. Online: [www.acsm-ca.qc.ca/virage/personne-agee/etre-grands-parents.html](http://www.acsm-ca.qc.ca/virage/personne-agee/etre-grands-parents.html)

“ I have three grandchildren, and my goodness me...they either make me feel old or they make me feel young. But I will say this, they certainly do keep the wheels lubricated – mentally and physically.<sup>7</sup> ”

— 76-year-old grandmother

## Erratum

The issue of *Expression* on “Seniors at work” (18-1) indicated that CPP/QPP contributions ceased after the age of 70.

Even if they are receiving their pension, older employees in **Quebec** continue to contribute to the provincial plan (QPP).



### Gilbert Barrette

began his career as a teacher and principal. He was

also the president of the Abitibi-Témiscamingue Regional Board of Health and Social Services for 16 years. He served as an elected Member of Parliament for the riding of Témiscamingue in 2003-2004. He sat on the Standing Committee on Health and the Special Committee on Non-Medical Use of Drugs, and was a member of the Prime Minister’s Caucus Task Force on Seniors.

Mr. Barrette and his wife Rita have three children and are the proud grandparents of six.