

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: Caring for Infants and Toddlers



As a grandparent, you may feel “out of practice” in caring for a very young child. It may have been several years since your own children were young. We know more now about how the brain develops and how to keep children safe, and the number of “educational” toys and products may seem overwhelming. What’s a grandparent raising an infant or toddler to do?

The first step to caring for your young grandchildren is to relax. Even though we’ve learned more over the last ten years about how very young children develop, the basic needs of very young children haven’t changed all that much. The basics that you gave your own children are still the most important things for your young grandchild: a warm loving relationship; a safe, secure home; chances to try new things; consistent routines; and gentle, loving guidance. By providing a loving, nurturing home for your grandchild, you are giving her essential support that will help her grow into a healthy, happy adult.

Basic Safety for Infants and Toddlers

One of your first concerns as a grandparent is keeping your young child safe. Infants and toddlers can’t understand what activities are unsafe, so they need your careful supervision to prevent injuries. Here are some common childhood injuries, along with basic ways to keep your young grandchild safe:

• **Falls.** As soon as infants start rolling or crawling, they run the risk of falling. Place

safety gates at the top and bottom of stairs. Make sure windows are locked or screens are securely latched in place. Don’t leave infants alone on an adult bed or a sofa, even for a moment. When changing diapers, keep one hand on the child the whole time she is on the changing table. Toddlers are going to fall down a lot as they learn to walk. Check your rooms at “toddler level” for hard objects, sharp corners and uneven floors that could injure a falling toddler. Always supervise your infant or toddler carefully; children can fall very quickly.

• **Drowning.** A young child can drown in only inches of water within seconds. Never leave your infant or toddler alone in the bathtub, even for a minute. Be cautious with bathtub chairs for infants. A child could slip through the chair and become trapped under water. And don’t leave a bucket of water (such as a mop bucket) unattended around your toddler—he could fall head first into the bucket and drown.

• **Strangulation and Suffocation.** Children are strangled on clothing and equipment every year. To reduce the risk of strangulation, avoid clothes with drawstrings around the neck. Don’t attach pacifiers to an infant’s clothes with a ribbon or string. Make sure that the bars on cribs and play equipment are spaced so that the child’s head could not get trapped between them. Don’t use old cribs—many of them are strangulation hazards. Keep pillows, thick blankets, and soft toys out of cribs. Place your infant on her back to sleep.

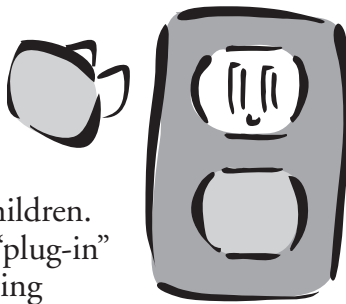
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- **Choking.** Children can choke on small objects very easily. Check toy labels carefully; many packages specify what ages the toy is safe for. Do not give infants and toddlers toys with small parts. Latex balloons are very unsafe for young children. Young children are also at higher risk of choking while eating. Teach children safe eating habits by requiring children to sit at the table when they eat. Avoid serving foods that pose choking hazards to children under three, or cut them into very small, non-round pieces. Foods that are choking hazards include hot dogs, raisins, nuts, popcorn, hard candy, and grapes.

- **Car Crashes.** Car and truck crashes are one of the most common causes of unintentional injury for young children. You can help your child be safe by placing her in an approved child safety seat every time she rides in the car. Infants need to ride in a rear-facing seat until they are a year old and weigh at least 20 pounds. Toddlers should ride in a child safety seat until they weigh at least 40 pounds. Children between 40 and 80 pounds should sit in a belt-positioning booster seat. For more information on child passenger safety, contact your local Extension Service office.

- **Electricity.** Electrical outlets and cords can be dangerous to young children. Be sure to secure all outlets with a “plug-in” cover to prevent children from putting objects in the outlet. Electrical cords should be out of sight to prevent toddlers from tripping on them or putting them in their mouths.

With these safety precautions in place, your grandchildren will have the opportunity to begin exploring the world around them. This safe environment and your caring assistance create the opportunity for them to learn and develop.



Brain Development and Your Grandchild

A newborn baby's brain is not like an adult's. When a baby is born, most of the brain cells, called neurons, have developed. But most of the pathways between neurons that control our thinking and our actions are formed during the first years of life, based on experience. As a baby interacts with the world around him, his brain cells make millions of connections. The brain keeps track of the experiences that happen regularly, and those pathways become stronger. The pathways that are not used regularly are pruned away to make room for the most important ones.

You, as a grandparent, play an important role in helping your grandchild's brain develop. Promoting brain development doesn't require lots of time or expensive toys. What young children need most are positive experiences to help them learn more about the world. Here are some easy ways you can help build your grandchild's brain:

- **Make your home safe.** Make your home an interesting and safe place for her to explore, without confining her for long periods in a playpen. Check your home carefully for anything that might endanger your grandchild. Keep electrical outlets covered. Remove breakable objects from children's reach. Lock up medicines and cleaning products.

- **Provide enriching experiences.** New experiences help the brain make connections. Remember that simple, everyday things are new to infants and toddlers. Pots and pans make interesting sounds, and a simple trip to the grocery store can be an exciting learning opportunity.

- **Read and sing with your grandchild.** Start reading aloud when your grandchild is an

infant. Hearing you read helps your grandchild learn language, and snuggling together with a favorite book strengthens your relationship. Singing and dancing together are also great ways to have fun together while also building your grandchild's talking and listening skills.

• **Repeat, repeat, repeat.** Young children learning language need to hear the same words and phrases over and over. Read your grandchild's favorite book regularly, even if you both know it by heart. Talk with your grandchild about things you see or do. Use his name when you speak to him. Remember that repeating helps build connections in the brain.

Relationships are Important

It may be hard to believe that a young infant can have relationships. But it's true—babies begin forming attachments to adults as soon as they are born. And early attachments can actually affect your grandchild's success later in life. Children who were securely attached to an adult as babies tend to get along better with others and often do better in school. So developing a secure, trusting relationship with your young grandchild is important.

There are several things you can do to help your young grandchild build a secure attachment.

• **Be responsive to his needs.** Pay attention to the baby's cues, and respond when he coos, cries, or laughs. It's not true that responding to a baby whenever he cries will "spoil" him. Babies younger than 6 months old cannot be spoiled. A baby cries because he needs something from you. When you respond to the baby's cries, he learns that he can trust you to take care of him. This trust helps him build a secure attachment.

• **Play together.** Spend time interacting with your young grandchild one-to-one. Set aside some time each day to play, sing songs, and read together. Take walks, and describe what you see. Use diapering, baths, and mealtimes to talk to your grandchild. Having fun with your grandchild helps strengthen your relationship.

• **Be consistent.** Knowing what to expect in your home helps your grandchild feel secure. If your grandchild's life was chaotic before she

came to your home, it's especially important to set up predictable routines for meals, baths, and bedtime. For example, the bedtime routine might include putting on pajamas, having a bottle, rocking in the rocking chair, and reading a story. And stick to the routine; try to do things in the same

order every day.

• **Be patient.** Forming a trusting relationship takes time. Your grandchild might have trouble adjusting to living with you at first. But your patience, understanding and love will help him form a secure, loving relationship with you.

Remember that babies can form strong, secure attachments to more than one person. Your grandchild's relationship with you is special, and you can't be replaced in her mind. Reassure your grandchild's parents or other caregivers that the baby can have close relationships with all of you, as long as you are loving and consistently respond to her needs. (For more ideas on helping your grandchild maintain a relationship with his parents, see "Grandparents as Parents: Helping Grandchildren Stay in Contact with Parents.")

When your grandchild is about 12 to 18 months old, she may be scared of strangers or

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may get upset when you leave. She may cry, or cling to you, or run to be picked up when you return. This is actually a good sign that she feels secure around you and depends on you. Keep your first trips away from your grandchild short. If possible, leave her with someone she knows. Give her plenty of time to adjust before leaving, especially if she is in a new place. Spend some time playing with her, and then reassure her that you will be back soon. Never sneak out without saying goodbye; she will only be more upset when she discovers you're gone. But don't keep coming back to "check on her." This makes the separation harder. And be patient—as she gets older, she will learn how to handle separating from you more easily.

Guiding Toddlers with Love

Guiding children's behavior is one of the biggest challenges of grandparenting. When children begin crawling and walking, they begin to test limits. Toddlers are naturally curious. They explore the world by touching everything around them, and they tend to put things in their mouths. They also try out their new skills by running, climbing, and jumping.

Safety is your first concern. Everything is a challenge to toddlers. And they aren't always aware of danger, so they need your guidance to keep them safe. The best strategy is to prevent problems before they happen. Supervise your toddlers closely at all times. Remove unsafe objects from their reach. Close and lock doors to rooms where they shouldn't play. Find interesting toys and activities that keep their attention. Spend time playing with them. Set up a regular schedule for eating and sleeping.



When toddlers misbehave, correct them gently and redirect them to another activity. Keep rules short and simple, and try to use positive statements. If a toddler is throwing blocks, you might tell her, "Keep the blocks on the floor" or "Let's build a tower with the blocks." If your toddler is playing with something she shouldn't, redirect her by taking her to another room or giving her an interesting toy to play with. Be consistent—redirect your toddler every time she misbehaves.

Give toddlers simple choices. Let them pick between two shirts, or decide whether to have broccoli or green beans for dinner one night.

Letting them choose gives them some control and makes them feel important. Keep choices simple. Two or three options are enough for most toddlers; too many choices just confuse them. And make sure the choices are equally acceptable to you. Don't give them a choice if you won't allow them to choose it. If it's bedtime, for example, don't ask your toddler whether he wants to go to bed or keep playing. Tell him that it's time to get ready for bed, but let him choose whether to read a story or brush his teeth first.

Try not to overwhelm toddlers with too many rules. Toddlers have very short memory and won't remember a large number of rules. And you'll end up frustrated trying to enforce them. Keep in mind that toddlers learn through repetition. You may have to repeatedly redirect a persistent toddler, or remind her to keep the truck on the floor. Guiding toddlers takes time and patience. Over time, your toddler will learn to follow the simple rules you set. And as your child gets older, she can help decide some rules and consequences for breaking them.

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In Summary

Raising infants and toddlers can be challenging, but it's also rewarding. Keep them busy with fun and exciting new opportunities for learning. Protect them from dangerous situa-

tions. Provide consistent routines, loving guidance, and a nurturing home. Be attentive to their needs and spend plenty of time playing together. Your support will help your grandchild grow into a healthy, happy adult.

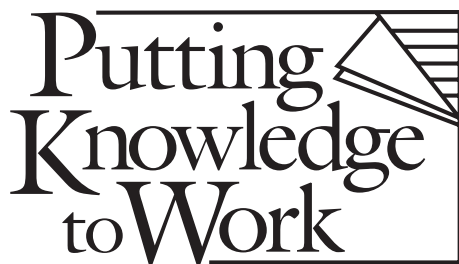
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Gale A. Buchanan, Dean and Director