

When retirement brings the joys of availability

Ken Gill

Of course you're experienced in these things

Well before your retirement date, it's very likely that you already know all about the joys and responsibilities of being a grandparent. Whether you have been blessed with one or ten grandchildren (we have eight), your working life has been interwoven with babysitting, sleepovers, cuddles, laughter, tears, disposables, weekend get-togethers, school pick-ups, hours at the sports field, school concerts, birthday parties, crowd control, counselling and so much more.

No doubt you have looked forward to those first days of retirement – those first days of relief and escape – those first days of finally looking after you, you, you – those first days of quiet reading over a good coffee and cake – those first days of – hang on, I'll just answer the phone.

"Hi dad, is mum home? What are you both doing today? Sorry to ask, but Shirley is covered in nits and I need to get to the chemist and grab some other stuff at the shops as well. Are you able to come over and mind her and Tommy for a while? Not sure if I'll send them to day care tomorrow when I'm working, but I'll chat to you about that when you come over."

Retirement can mean availability (especially to those who may lurk at the other end of the phone).

But that's OK, because we love them

What can be better at the start of the day than a beautiful little grandchild running up the driveway, arms waving wildly, shouting "Nanny!" or "Poppy!" and jumping into our welcoming embrace? Now, before you answer with "ushering them (not too eagerly) back down the driveway at the end of the day for their parents to take them home", let's agree – grandchildren are a great joy and they add so much to our lives.



So what's new in grandparenting?

Much has changed since those long ago days when we were the youngsters visiting our own grandparents. Reflecting also, it was probably less common that they came to visit us. Back then, our grandparents seemed to be very old. Grandma was always wearing an apron and spent most of the time in the kitchen. Grandpa always wore a hat and trouser braces and didn't have teeth and wore his slippers out to do the gardening. They both enjoyed a pot of tea – not sure if flat whites existed in those days – but rarely in the company of any grandchildren, whose place was well out of the way in the back yard. They had no car. The best thing they had for the grandchildren to play with was the cat. Did they even have a TV?

And so to us – the current generation of grandparents! There we are in great numbers at the school gate – sharing our stories concerning our duties for the day and week with fellow grandparents and loving mums and dads whose parents (in turn) have not yet retired (and are thus not yet available to help out with these responsibilities). Yes, we have arrived by car – fully fitted with approved child seats; fully supplied with peppermints or fizzy fruits and other such non-crumbs-dropping treats; fully TOMTOM-programmed to drive

home via the nearest McDonald's for life-saving milkshakes – but yet to be fitted with the latest in attack-proof glass barriers between the driver in the front and the demanding passengers in the rear.

In retirement, our grandparent multi-skilling ever expands

Retirement implies increased availability. Availability implies more time - more time for grandparenting. Our lives are all the more rich as a result of this outcome.

There remains a significant overlap between pre-retirement and post-retirement grandparent roles and responsibilities. However, increased availability introduces the possibility of whole-day and multiple-day assistance to our children – who in most cases will have both themselves and their spouses working. This assistance may well be in the form of regular child care on one or more days of the week.

Having the pleasure of the company of our grandchildren for extended periods brings with it the joys and the challenges of what to have available for them and what to do with them. How do we best cater for the needs and interests of children who are 60 or more years younger than us?

Might our ever developing multi-skilling involve attendance at senior workshops on how to play Minecraft or Fortnite? Perhaps we need to sacrifice a few hours of 2CH and watch a bit more of Disney or Rage on a Saturday morning. And with older folk now establishing a majority presence on Facebook, what social media platform do we need to master next to best understand how our grandchildren interact?

As with all such things, there is no magic checklist of strategies or activities to cover the many roles and responsibilities of grandparents – especially when retirement can potentially see our time spent with grandchildren each week measured in days rather than hours.

Of course you're experienced, but they are coming again tomorrow!

The nits have been treated (so you've been told), you've taken your pills, you've done your exercises, the pantry and fridge are stocked, the glass cabinet is locked, the weather forecast is good and you've cancelled your pre-planned golf game and movies date – so are you prepared?

- The time that you spend with your grandchildren is the best thing that you will provide for them.
- Coming or going, they are never too big for a cuddle or kiss or handshake or at least a high five.
- Your home in itself provides a unique and exciting playground for your grandchildren, who will enjoy exploring and discovering throughout the rooms and hallways and outdoor areas that are most likely quite different to their own home environment.
- Eight hours of iPads, Octonauts and Paw Patrol – no way! Let's play outside first! And then maybe you can have an hour on your screens.
- But we're hungry! So, into the kitchen where the grandchildren can prove to be wonderful apprentice chefs – mixing up the cup cake ingredients, making a mess with the icing, negating the need for washing up with each slurp of the tongue on the spoon and learning important skills and producing their very own morning teas.
- Back outside now to look for worms in the garden; to plant new seeds and look for them to grow between each subsequent visit, until the plants are ready for picking; to build a dinosaur house out of rocks and sticks and shrubs and to hide the dinosaurs and their eggs, to be discovered again at next week's visit; to carefully visit the garage with Poppy to dig out the scrap timber to build a fort or a tower – and can we please hammer in some nails?; to kick the ball; to bounce on the trampoline; to chase us till we drop. Enough! It's time for coffee and those cup cakes! And is it really only 10.30?
- The indoors are well enough resourced to encourage the grandchildren themselves to choose the activity that best captures their interest at that particular time. The toy box collection has evolved over the years and its contents range from the bath-time duck to the indestructible (but non-floating) Stretch Armstrong. The dress-up box includes Mickey Mouse ears, a Santa hat, the best ever pink fairy dress and a selection of Nanna's favourite necklaces. There are books galore on the bookshelf and Lego aplenty in the cupboard. The doll's house was Poppy's woodwork creation from 30 years ago but still survives and entertains. A set of Magformers comprises magnetic plastic triangles, squares and pentagons and more than satisfies the creativity of the budding young builders (and gives away Poppy's obvious bias as a mathematics tragic). There are pencils and pens and paints and paper and paste and puzzles and plenty of other paraphernalia (that don't all begin with "p") to hopefully keeps the kids occupied and happy.

- You can marvel at how easily children can (at times) be left to their own devices and invent their own games and have such great fun. Grandparents are not always required to be the entertainers, and therein lies the opportunity for that previously mentioned coffee.
- Grandparents are not always required to be the teachers and therein also lies the opportunity for the grandchildren to show us how to make the perfect paper airplane or how to draw volcanoes or how to play Angry Birds or how to make slime or how to banana kick the ball into the goal.
- But when they particularly ask (or insist) that you play with them, other unexpected activities (from the past) might be pulled from the games and craft cupboard. Not ignoring the chance to cuddle up close and have your grandchild teach you the latest game on the iPad, there is the opportunity to introduce the youngsters to some games or activities that we ourselves may have enjoyed as kids. There is no better example than the playing of card games – particularly those that involve a number of players and encourage that old fashioned thing called “conversation around the table”. SNAP and UNO may be more familiar to our grandchildren, but (dependent on their ages) their curiosity might be teased by old games such as Newmarket or Crib (which are well worth Google searches if you are curious).
- How many of our grandchildren know how to knit or sew or nail or saw (with proper attention to supervision and safety)?
- How many of our grandchildren have taken an old LP out of its sleeve, placed it on the turntable and puzzled over not only how it works, but how such an old thing can produce the sounds of a song that they recognize as a current hit?
- For the older grandchildren (subject to resources and your recovery from that last operation), more active games might include table-tennis, darts, handball, soccer, netball, snooker, cricket or touch football.
- Have we mentioned a trip to the movies? A ride on the bus, train or ferry? A play in the park? A babycino at the café? Ten pin bowling? A big day out at Scenic World? A pay rise for grandparenting?

So, who is your mummy?

Such questions may have already been raised by your inquisitive grandchildren, but retirement provides a greater opportunity for us to better research our own family histories and to have at hand the means to more meaningfully explain aspects of the family tree to these hungry young minds.

A framed photo of great grandma and grandpa, an old family album, your recently published family history book, the photo library on your computer, a sample of your mother’s embroidery or your father’s wooden shaft golf stick – the things that grandparents keep and love to show in the belief that the family story is worth passing on.

Was that the phone again?

“Hi dad, is mum home? What are you both doing today? Thanks heaps again for looking after the kids and the house last month when we were in London! So, hey, we’re thinking of demolishing the house and we’ll need somewhere to live whilst the new one is built. It’ll probably only take about 6 or 9 months. Dad ... are you still there?”

Contributor details:

Ken Gill (0438 250 977 or ken.gill@optusnet.com.au) 24/6/18



Ken was Principal of Richmond High School (1992-2004) and Macarthur Girls High School (2005-2010). In retirement he enjoys the challenges of golf, the discoveries of travel and the wonders of watching grandchildren growing up.