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By Bryony Wood

**A** few weeks ago I was sleeping fitfully when the phone jolted me out of a dream. Fumbling madly in the pitch dark to find the light switch, I finally managed to grab the phone and held my breath, waiting for the news.

'Isabella Grace, 7lb 11oz, born at five past two, Mum and baby doing great'. Barely half an hour old and already she'd reduced me to tears of joy.

What a huge relief. The labour that seemed to have gone on for hours and hours was over and a new little person was now in our family.

A healthy child too, I never take that for granted. A tiny bundle of promise for us to love and unwrap as the years go by.

Isabella is my second grandchild, a beautiful sister for two-year-old

Noah. Quite simply, for me, being a grandma is like being able to eat all the chocolate in the world without the calories. It's like having ten tons of happiness landing on your doorstep.

#### **We've survived**

For those fortunate enough to become grandparents, we've survived parenthood and come out the other end, hopefully with some wisdom and experience. We know more about life, love and the universe, and if we are diplomatic, wise and sensitive we can invest into our grown-up children the right love and support that can make their own journeys a little easier.

What kind of grandparent do you want to be? Much of it is a choice we make, but some things are not so simple. Families are often so spread out these days, so it might be 'quality time' rather than 'quantity time' that you have with your grandchildren. But with some effort, dis-

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tances can be bridged with creative thinking. Modern technology can help. One teenager I know has his 'Techno-Gran' who bought a mobile phone and learnt to text so she could keep in touch with her grandchildren. But however you communicate, make it personal — to the child — as often as possible. Letters, e-mails, postcards and telephone calls addressed to the whole family are all fine, but children of all ages feel special if they get something addressed to them.

#### **Working as a team**

Ideally, family life should offer us acceptance and safety, a place to

retreat when things get tough, and of course, unconditional love. But all too often family life today is less than ideal and this is where grandparents can step in and help. But be careful. This must be done without undermining the parents' role and destabilising the situation further. You need to be working as a team. Having that extra generation gap can mean communication between the child and grandparent is easier than with the parent. Keeping an open, honest, loving relationship means that you can be the 'bolt-hole' when things get tough for your grandchild — especially a teenager.

One granny I know invites her teenage granddaughter around each month for a special meal, with all the best china and crystal out. It's a three-course posh dinner that makes them both feel valued and has seen them both through tough situations as they chat and share precious time together.

However, being a grandparent does not mean you have to buy your way into a child's affections. It's often the inexpensive — or even free — things done year in, year out, with love and laughter that will be remembered for ever. And of course, the greatest gift to give to any child is time and love.

**Going from two generations to three generations is like adding the third dimension to family life.**

It's often a grandparent's death that is the first bereavement a child faces. How we face our own ageing, how we deal with illness, increasing fragility and limitations will have a huge impact on them. It is our duty to show them how to do this well, and dispel fears about ageing and death. Show them it is possible to grow older with style and dignity, while still being able to laugh and enjoy every day to the full.



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**I've learnt so much**

Since being a grandma, I've learnt so much about the joys of children that I think passed me by when I was a new mum. Watching a child discover something is like watching creation unfold all over again. We become so blasé about the world, that seeing things through a child's eyes reminds us of the beauty and wonder around us. Stopping to smell the flowers on a walk around the block may add ages to the walk, but with a small child clutching your hand, stopping to smell a perfumed rose, letting it tickle your noses is just priceless. Someone once said 'we don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing. But excuses to play aren't necessary with a grandchild in tow.

There's an old adage that says 'when a baby is born, so is a grandparent'. While you may have years of valuable experience in the role of parent, being a grandparent is subtly different, and it will take some adjusting to. Your own children probably won't bring up their children the way you would. You have to earn the right to give advice, and even then it should only be given when specifically asked, handed out in tiny packages, which are carefully wrapped in love and approval.

These days too, older people are younger, if you know what I mean! Now we generally work longer, live longer, keep healthier and active

longer. Being a grandparent often happens when you're in the prime of life. It's no longer the domain of the elderly retired couple that have all the time in the world (as if!). Many grandparents are working and have to squeeze family time into an already hectic schedule. The work/life balance keeps on challenging us the more our family grows.

But you can only do, what you can do, and perfecting the art of guilt-free juggling is worth learning!

Going from two generations to three generations is like adding the third dimension to family life. Even though I'm still relatively new to being a grandma I've learnt so very much. I've learned to play again, to dance to nursery rhymes and wiggle on the floor like a snake. I've fallen in love, head over heels in love with someone new; and I'm learning to invest in a relationship that I've waited half my life for. And I intend to use the rest of my life to make the most of it.

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