

Transcript: Across the Generations: The Role of Grandparents in Young Children's Lives Featuring Barbara Bowman, M.A.

Q: I am really pleased to welcome Dr. Barbara Bowman who will be joining us today to talk about the role of grandparents in the lives of young children. Barbara is the Irving Harris professor of child development and chief officer in the Office of Early Childhood Education in the Chicago public schools. Umm, and I have to ask, Barbara, are you also a grandma?

A: I am a doting grandmother. I have the most wonderful grandchild in the world.

Q: Part of what inspired us to include you in this, umm, podcast series is that when we did the survey that we did recently, umm, that Hart Research helped us with, we found that 47% of parents said that they turn to their mother or mother-in-law for information on childrearing-- , much higher than the number who turned to friends, or pediatricians, or websites.

: And—and then the other finding that I think is relevant to what we're talking about today is the large number of parents who, uh, use regular childcare 51%, and that almost 27% of them rely on grandparents for that regular care.

So—and I'm sure, you know, there are other surveys that would indicate that the figure is higher among certain populations. And I think if we're lucky enough to have a grandparent nearby, that that's often understandably the first person a mother or father will turn to.

A: Exactly.

Q: Umm, is this something you are finding in—in the communities you're working with?

A: Absolutely. And, uh, let me say that that's not new.

Q: Yes.

A: Grandparents have been playing an important role in the lives of their grandchildren and their children for many, many years. And in many ways, uh, uh, what has happened is a—uh, a return to, uh, old ways, uh, uh, as the consequence of the, umm, recession that hit us several years ago.

Q: Yes. Yes.

- A: Umm, so, umm, when times are good, many, uh, grandchildren go to childcare or they have help in the home. But when times get bad, umm, people look to grandmothers and grandfathers for help.
- Q: Right. Well, let's talk about some of the ways in which, umm, you know, a grandparent's role in a child's life is, umm, very different from a parent's role, and—and what they bring to the relationship with a—to a young child that's—that's unique?
- A: Well all children have, uh, a need to be loved, and, umm, to be cared for, and to be responded to. And it's quite a drain on parents to do that for one child, much less two or three. So, one of the really important roles that the grandparents play is to provide the extra support that grandchildren need, and they come to the relationship ready to love their grandchildren.
- Q: Right. Right.
- A: It's, umm, absolutely a wonderful opportunity for grandchildren to have someone who's not the parent.
- Q: Right.
- A: And it's a wonderful thing for grandparents to not parent again. They really just want their grandchildren. What grandparents add to the—the mix is someone else who loves you, who's there in—uh, in an emergency for you, but is not the primary responsibility person.
- Q: But I think also important particularly as a child gets into the toddler years introducing the child to things that may be from—from another generation—another era. Umm, and I think these days particularly with kids being so plugged in to a lot of different video things—a friend of mine was saying that for her child the experience of bonding with her grandfather was very much about connecting with nature in a way that, you know, she and her husband just—they live in the city, they didn't really have a chance to.
- A: It's something that can draw them together—uh, draw the generations together, fishing, uh, carpentry, even technology. Uh, my husband, uh, introduced both his—his child and his grandchild to, uh, computers and technology, and, uh, made sure that they were literate, uh, on their, uh, laptops long before most people had laptops.--DELETE

Sound changed here—got more muted.

A: Grandparents need to understand that if they're gonna be important people in their grandchildren's lives, they've got to—they've got to do some of that kind of thing. They've got to be there. They have to be a part of their lives, otherwise they're just nice strangers that, uh, come in from time to time, but they're not any important—they don't serve any important role in their grandchildren's lives. So, it really does require an effort on both—the part of the parents and on the part of the grandparents to be involved, but also to be appreciated.

Q: Yeah. I—have a fabulous photograph, of my—umm, my niece's baby talking to my sister—you know, Skyping with my sister. And she's not even a year old. 5:35-Hear Barbara here overlapping—can we edit out? She's sitting on the floor and she's leaning forward, and my sister is there, you know, smiling and—

A: Absolutely.

Q: And as my sister says, it's hardly a substitute for being in the room.

A: Skype has been a wonderful thing grandparents and for grandchildren.

Q: It is. It's really fantastic. Umm, and I think that, you know, uh, again, this is something that some members of my sister's generation have a harder time with than others, 'cause they didn't grow up with this technology. Umm, you know, it's not the way they've known to stay in touch. But I think it speaks to a need to be very flexible about the ways that you find to connect.

A: Well, you know—the grandparent/child relationship can be very, very strong and, uh, permeate, uh, not only the childhood, but the adulthood of the grandchild. So, we're talking about a long-term relationship if—uh, if you work at it.

Q: Yes. Yes.

A: But it isn't something that just happens automatically. It does require some effort on the part of the grandparent. But if the relationship has been sturdily built during the, umm, early years, the probability is it will maintain itself well into adulthood. And it's the opportunity for grandparents to have a young person who can help them set up their computer, will come and call on them, who will bring the great grandchildren over to visit, or who will, uh, be there for them in times of

sickness, or, uh, need, uh, for advice. So, grandchildren are a wonderful resource for older, uh, people, and—but it takes cultivating them, uh, as relationships when they're young.

- Q: Yeah. I mean, I think actually you're pointing to something really important, which is maybe this, umm, assumption that—you know, that you're the grandmother, so they'll just love you because you're the grandmother.
- A: No-no-no. It's a relationship.
- Q: Right. when we talk about some of the challengers that—umm, that grandparents face, , in terms of who does what, or what role you play, what do you feel are some of the biggest challenges to being a, you know, loving and let's just say effective grandparent?
- A: A good grandmother?
- Q: Yes. A good grandmother.
- A: Well, we all have in our—in our heads the model of the parenting and grandparenting we had as children.
- Q: Right.
- A: But, uh, when we come into the grandparenting role often our children, uh, they've married people who belong to different races and religion, they have different belief systems about how family ought to be structured, so we come into it with a model which may or may not work.
- Q: Right.
- A: So, being very cautious about finding out what model of grandparenting, what model childrearing spouses have, particularly if they come from somewhat different backgrounds. Grandparents have to feel their way to find out whether the model they have is one that's going to work effectively, and, if not, how can they change what they do so that they maintain all of the goodies of being a grandparent without creating unnecessary tension.
- Q: Yeah. —I think that this idea of, you know, mutual respect of really spending some time, paying attention to the kinds of parents your kids and their spouses want to be before you leap in there to make assumptions or suggestions—

A: Exactly.

Q: But what do you think is the most important thing for grandparents to think about, umm, you know, as they negotiate this new relationship?

A: Well, I think really the important thing is how you are going to get along with your grown children.

Q: Right.

A: Uh, uh, and, uh, obviously the relationship has to change. There's no question that grandparents probably know more about taking care of little babies than—than their children do. On the other hand if they simply take over and—and act as if their children are idiots and can't possibly take care of their own child, they begin to undermine the competence of their own children. So, it's—uh, it's, uh, walking very carefully.

Q: That's a lot harder for a lot of people than it is for others. I think being aware that—umm, you know, how important it is, especially if this is a new baby—a first baby for parents to learn from their mistakes

A: Exactly.

Q: If you can be there with guidance without—as you put it very well, without taking over, umm, you stand a much better chance of being included in that family's life and forging that bond with that—that—that new member of the family.

A: Exactly. Children are wonderfully resilient.

Q: Right. Right.

A: And if they're loved, it comes through.

Q: Yeah.

A: Uh, uh, even if the parents don't do all the things we think they should do as grandparents,

Q: Right.

A: Their children will do just fine.

- Q: Look, one of the things every generation faces in this regard is that, you know, there is a lot of difference in the kinds of knowledge. .
- A: That's right. And—and grandparents really need to find out what the younger generation is up to, and—and, uh, be with it a little bit, uh, if they're going to play an active role. If—if they're shocked and—and surprised, uh, for instance that their, uh, uh, daughter-in-law, or, uh, their own daughter is breastfeeding in front of mixed company, uh, many grandparents are not used to that sort of thing. Uh, uh, a little—umm, they're not used to women showing their—their, uh, breast in front of other people.
- Q: Right. Right.
- A: Uh, and I have heard many of, uh, older, uh, grandparents say, it—it was—it was kind of—of a surprise when she just put the—put the receiving blanket over her shoulder and started feeding the—the baby in mixed company.
- Q: Right. Right.
- A: Uh, well, that's the way young people do it nowadays.
- Q: Yeah.
- A: Grandparents need to familiarize themselves with those kinds of changes. Well, cloth diapers may be less abrasive, but almost all children wear paper diapers now. It really is okay.
- Q: Right. Right. I think that's very important. Yeah. I think you're right that there's certainly a need to, umm, umm, be very up to speed on what is kind of accepted, as you said before, in terms of the world that the parents are now living in versus the world that you might have lived in as a parent.
- A: Exactly.
- Q: Let's talk a little bit, Barbara, about a situation where actually grandparents are the primary caretaker, or rather, you know, as you pointed out, because of the recession are maybe doing more of the childcare, umm, than they might have anticipated, or even necessarily wanted to do. I think that's often a very tough spot that grandparents are in. Umm, what—are you hearing this from the people you work with that—that sometimes one of the toughest things is that there's this assumption

among new parents that mom or dad will be just thrilled to take care of the baby?

A: You know, in a way they are, but until the reality hits that—that you're a little long in the tooth for this sort of thing. I remember keeping my granddaughter for the weekend, and, uh, when her mother finally came home and took her away, my husband and I went to bed at 5:00.

Q: Right.

A: We were absolutely exhausted.

Q: Yes. Right.

A: Uh, we had no idea how much energy it took to have a young child in the house. Uh, uh, and it really—we began to say, you know, two days is about the limit that we can keep her.

Q: Right. Right. That probably was sort of hard, I mean, to just realize that you had to be clear. But I think one of the things that's so important is for grandparents to be clear.

A: Well, I think actually my daughter recognized it as well as we did.

Q: Right.

A: When she came we were dragging our little tails. She, uh, understood that—that we didn't have the kind of energy we had when she was young.

Q: Right.

A: And that she needed to protect us too. So, parents need to also keep a wary out that they're not asking too much. But most grandparents are more than willing to pitch in, and particularly if there's an emergency. They're your first line of defense of the family. And I think they want to be called on. But parents also need to be aware that their energy may be limited, their health may be impaired, and they have to protect the grandparent as well as protect their children.

Q: Yes. keeping an eye out for respecting, you know, what your parents' limitations are, as you say, the—the exhaustion level of taking care of a baby. Are there other kinds of support—if you are actually turning to your mother or mother-in-law to be a primary caretaker, are there other kinds of

- supports that you think, umm, a grandmother in that situation needs that parents can provide that they may have overlooked?
- A: Sure. Uh, and let me say I'm intrigued with the fact that increasingly grandfathers are playing an active role. Uh, you know, the biggest—the most important thing that parents can do is be appreciative.
- Q: Right.
- A: They don't have to give money. They don't have to buy presents. But for the grandparent to feel that parents are appreciative of the effort that they're making, and that, uh, they're—it is not, uh, just taken for granted.
- Q: Yeah. Yeah. I think that's really important. One of the things that, you know, sometimes really is a challenge—is always a challenge for families, but I think for grandparents, is if the parents get divorced.
- A: Grandparents come to the divorce with lots of attitudes and belief systems that—that, uh, may get in the way of maintaining a good relationship with the parents and therefore being supportive of their grandchildren. So, one of the most important things is to figure out what is—what can I do to be supportive. One wants to be supportive to one's own child.
- Q: Right.
- A: And that's terribly important, but it's probably equally important not to subvert or be abrasive to the spouse who's, uh, leaving, but is still the parent of your grandchild. Divorce has become more common. There are more models of how people have managed this. And indeed in some instances all eight grandparents and all four parents are able to have the picnic in the summertime, and provide a united front to the children, that we are all here for you even though we have separate households, and we live our separate lives.
- A: Many families come, uh, against hard times. And grandparents need to do more than, uh, just be there.
- Q: Right.
- A: Uh, uh, and they may need to provide resources. Uh, and, you know, each family has to work out how much of the grandparents', uh, resources is going to go to the children and grandchildren, and how much will they

reserve for their own old age. There's some very, uh, sticky issues—that have to be confronted when, uh, times get hard.

Q: Yeah. Yeah. Definitely.

A: And, umm, open discussion of financing is one of the things that people tend to avoid.

Q: Yeah. Well, I think that's particularly true, Barbara, and—and I've seen this a lot where if they're—umm, you know, if—for example, if you had, you know, more than one child and one of them has a grandchild and needs a lot of support and help, umm, and that is draining your nest egg, it's not just in terms of what, you know, you're living on, but, you know, what you might leave to your other children.

A: Exactly. How do you—how do you manage to be fair.

Q: Yeah. Yeah. Right.

A: And fair does not necessarily mean everybody equal, but it certainly means everybody knows why particular decisions are being made.

Q: Right.

A: And, umm talking frankly with all of your children about your finances and why you're making the decisions that you're making in terms of dividing resources among them is really, really important if you're going to help them maintain good relationships with each other as well as with you.

Q: You know, if you could give—if you could give grandparents one piece of advice about, umm, when it comes to sort of being a—a good grandma or grandpa, what—what would you say?

A: Oh, you know, I guess the one thing I would say is that there isn't any one single way to get there, that—that, umm, how one organizes one's grandparenting will depend on so many different factors. Don't be rigid about it. Uh, if you have more than one child, you're gonna have to have more than one model, and—and to be flexible, to, uh, be willing to change yourself, to find out more about the world that, uh, your children and, uh, grandchildren are living in will require change. And I think that as we get older we tend to get a little rigid and a little unwilling to change. But the

real secret to a, uh, happy life, uh, as we age is our ability to change with the times. So, uh, to be—to not expect a single model of grandparenting. It's not gonna work that way. It's gonna take constant work. It's gonna take, like all relationships, constant change.

Q: Right. Great. Well, that is a very nice note to end on. And I think I would say that it probably applies to parents too, that they can't expect the grandparents to be necessarily what they imagined. They may exceed their expectations or not live up to them, but, umm, you know, **the payoff is (add back in)** this amazing relationship that is a very special one between a grandparent and a grandchild.

Q: So, Barbara, thank you so much for your time.

A: No problem. Loved talking with you.