

Book Review of *Being Grandma and Grandpa: Grandparents Share Advice, Insights and Experiences*

By

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Just over 6 years ago my daughter-in-law gave birth to my first grandchild. I was thrilled, of course, but also a bit apprehensive. Most of my own personal role models for grand parenting had lived at some distance from their grandchildren and only a couple of them had developed what I would call vital and significant relationships with their grandchildren. My own grandparents (oddly, my mother's father had married my father's mother after their respective spouses died) had lived 100 miles away and, while I knew them well enough to respect and be fond of them both, my vivid memories of them were few in number. And I wanted to develop a deeper relationship with my grandson than either of them did with me.

I would have been less anxious, I believe, if I had been able to lay my hands on *Being Grandma and Grandpa: Grandparents Share Advice, Insights and Experiences* (Emily Stier Adler and Michele Hoffnung. Grand Publications: 2018. ISBN: 9780-692-13223-4; \$20). This new book is full of wisdom for new grandparents, for grandparents who've been at it for a while, but would like to establish better relationships with their grandchildren, and perhaps especially for grandparents who live at some distance from their grandchildren but would like to establish an emotional closeness with them.

Not your usual "how to" book authors, Adler and Hoffnung ground their advice in the results of interviews with 224 grandparents. Theirs is a non-probability sample of 156 grandmothers and 68 grandfathers. Grandfathers tended to be more reluctant to respond than grandmothers, perhaps because they were, on the whole, somewhat less active grandparents than grandmothers. (Full disclosure: I was one of the grandfathers they talked with.) The authors realize their sample may not be representative, acknowledging that

their respondents may generally be atypically-engaged grandparents. But such engagement is no bad thing for gaining insight into the ways of those who grandparent with pleasure, the likely goal of most readers. As social scientists and grandparents, Adler and Hoffnung bring expertise to their data and a passion to their writing. *Being Grandma and Grandpa...* makes for an enlightening and stimulating read.

Perhaps the key piece of advice that bubbles up: if you want to establish a good relationship with your grandchildren, maintain or establish a good one with their parents. This probably means recognizing that challenging parental authority is, in almost all cases, a losing proposition. What one grandmother said of her daughter-in-law might be said of any grandparent/parent relationship, "with daughters-in-law you need to watch what you say. I learned this very quickly and now I keep my nose out of things." The authors point out that this does not mean that a grandparent cannot establish "grandparent rules" when you have been asked to provide childcare. But it does mean not giving unwanted advice . . . at least not too frequently.

The compensations for such restraint are almost inevitable. This is largely because parents almost always need outside resources to parent successfully and one of the most precious resources is their own parents or stepparents. One of the useful things about this book is that Adler and Hoffnung do *not* rely simply on their own interview respondents, but also manage to confirm many of their insights with research based on even more representative samples, sometimes involving parents rather than just grandparents. Thus, when they suggest that parents need their own parents as resources, they are able to cite a British survey that found that almost two-thirds of parents cited their own parents as the most supportive people or helping agencies in their lives.

Grandparents who live close to their grandchildren, for example, are often called upon to provide childcare. This care is more likely to be requested of, and given by, relatively young grandparents, studies show (where relatively young, I'm happy to report, includes those of us in our early 70s). But most grandparents give it happily . . . up to a point. And Adler and Hoffnung provide advice about what one should do once that point is passed: establish boundaries. But this advice is, as is practically all advice in the book, nuanced, often qualified by recognition of individual circumstance. One grandfather, for instance, suggests that his need for boundaries is greater than his wife's when he says, "I don't want to feel like a 'doormat' and have the grandkids dumped on me every time they want to go somewhere. I think parents need to be sensitive to this. I'm the one who says 'no' to them more often—no candy, etc. I've noticed that my wife is more of the 'good cop' and won't deny them things."

But for grandparents who live at some distance it's not so much a matter of establishing boundaries as it is of overcoming the boundary of distance. And it's grandparents who live at such distances who may be most helped by *Grandma and Grandpa*. My grandparents did not have access to FaceTime or Skype or uStyme (another video chat program that also provides access to a "library of e-books and games that can be used for shared reading and play"). But they happened to be wealthy enough, even in the 1950s, to afford some of the other things suggested by Adler and Hoffnung's respondents: e.g., visits or joint trips.

In fact, one of the book's nine chapters (Chapter 8) is completely devoted to grandparenting at a distance. Chapter 2 discusses variations in the grandparenting experience, including grandparenting when either the grandparents or the parents undergo, or have undergone, divorce and when grandchildren are adopted. Chapter 4 reflects on how grandparents need to adapt as grandchildren age and their interests change. (What? My grandson won't drop everything just to be with me when he becomes a teenager?)

Two core chapters (Chapters 7 and 8) focus on the benefits of active grandparenting—for the grandchildren, the parents and the grandparents—and the ways to be an active grandparent—including helping out parents, with their permission. The grand finale (Chapter 9) identifies resources for grandparents. I have already consulted several of the websites listed recommending grandparent/grandchild travel destinations.

Adler and Hoffnung have limited the scope of their project to grandparents who live independently and

are *not* the primary caretakers of their grandchildren. I happened to run into a woman at my doctor's office while I was reading their book, a woman who had just taken over the care of her unmarried son's infant girl, and I thought to myself, "This is someone who could use a few tips not provided by *Being Grandma and Grandpa...*" Perhaps someone reading this volume of *Sociology between the Gaps* will engage in the study that generates those tips.

But for those of us who have the potential to reap from grandparenting what one of Adler and Hoffnung's respondents called "the joy of parenting . . . without the day-to-day responsibility and oversight," I highly recommend *Being Grandma and Grandpa....*

About the Reviewer: In addition to being a Professor of Sociology at Rhode Island College, where he teaches Research Methods and Sociology of Gender, **Roger Clark** is also a devoted and loving grandfather.