

Building Relationships with Family Near or Far

Time Together

- Encourage your family member to establish a ritual that they do with the child every time they get together – something as simple as going to the park to swing (no matter the weather), going for a walk to get an ice cream cone, working on a craft project or puzzle together.
- Rather than bringing gifts on each visit, encourage your family member to bring simple things that they can DO WITH THE CHILD. Like puzzles, paints, a game, a book to read.
- Playing board games or card games together can be a nice way to interact. Your family will see your child's growing skills, and your child will learn about rules and fair play.
- Have your child spend time alone with family members, without you always there, and without siblings along. A trip to the library or the local park can be a nice outing.

Gifts and Traditions

- Encourage family members to create traditions. My mother has made every Halloween costume for my kids over the years, and they have had the joy of picking *any* character from *any* book or movie for Grandma to re-create. (Some have been pretty challenging!)
- Encourage family members to give gifts that showcase their talents. If they knit, sew, cook, take photos, or build things, then that gift has its own meaning, but also gives you a chance to talk to your child about all the cool things the grandparents know how to do.

Comforts of Home

Children are reassured by routine and predictability. Although my husband rarely visited his grandmother in England, he knew that when he did, there would be buttered bread and digestive biscuits. My grandparents lived nearby, and at one house, I knew I would find home-made taffy, coloring books and Reader's Digests. At the other house, there were always word-search puzzles and my grandmother's collection of little ceramic and metal shoes, which I could play with if I was very careful. Encourage your family members to think about what the reliable treats will be at their house.

Common Interests

Find things your child has in common with family members, and encourage them to share that interest. My son and his grandpa spend a lot of time talking about trains! My teenage daughter and her aunt go on Starbucks runs and shopping trips together.

Share family stories

- Talk to your kids about your childhood, your parents, what their lives were like when they're younger, and what they do now. This helps to ground your child in the history of the family.
- Encourage family to share their memories of day-to-day life when they were young, and their memories of historical events. This gives your child a deeper understanding of the past.

Encourage your children to reach out to other family members for advice and support

- Let them know there are other adults in their life they can count on for wisdom and empathy.

Staying Connected with Family Long-Distance

Mail

Good old-fashioned snail mail is very appealing to children – they love having something tangible to open and look at. This doesn't have to mean a hand-written letter. A grandparent could send postcards, or an envelope with a few stickers in it, or a puzzle from a magazine, or the comics. We don't get a newspaper at home, and years ago when my girls visited my parents, they loved reading the comics in the paper my parents subscribe to. Ever since then, my parents pack up the Sunday comics every few weeks and send them to the girls. Now half of the comics come to our house, and the others go to my oldest daughter at college to share with her dorm mates.

Skype and Phone Calls

Phone calls are nice. But Skype is even better! Being able to see the child's face will be precious to your family. And for your young children, having the image of the face as well as the voice makes a huge difference in helping them to connect. Here are some ideas on how to make the most of calls:

- Prep your family member ahead of time with ideas for questions to ask that will help engage the child in a conversation. With a toddler, you might tell family to ask "what does a dog say? What does a cat say" and so on. With a teenager, you might clue in your family in advance that they should ask about a movie your child recently saw, or a trip you're planning.
- Prep your child ahead of time by reminding them what they know about that family member.
- Remember that toddler attention spans are short. Short but frequent calls are better for building relationships. A 2 minute call every day is more fun than 15 minutes once a week.
- Some people read a story book to the child over the phone / computer. This may be easier for a young child to engage in than a conversation is. They could read the same book every week and the child would probably love that! (When they visit, they can read it in person!)
- Some grandparents like to do "magic": they coordinate with you to have a snack at home that they also have. They can then "send it through the phone" and you make it magically appear.

Recordings and Photos

- Search for "recordable storybooks" on Amazon, or at Hallmark.com, and you'll find several picture books that a family member can record their voice on, telling the story.
- Film a family member talking or telling stories, or giving your child a tour of their home or one of their favorite places. Your child can watch it again and again.
- Photos: have photos of family members around the house, and talk about those people often. (And not just formal portraits on the wall! Also have snapshots the child can carry around.)
- Take plenty of pictures when family members visit. Make a scrapbook. Review it with your child before the next visit.

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Sources / Other recommended articles: <http://www.helpguide.org/mental/grandparenting.htm>

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<http://everydaylife.globalpost.com/good-longdistance-relationship-toddler-grandchild-13325.html>

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