



By LISA COWNIE

The Great
Grandparent Connection:
Bridging the
GAP
BETWEEN
GENERATIONS

It's a bond that stretches across generations, sometimes across miles, and almost certainly across hearts. The bond between a grandparent and grandchild can truly be special.

But not all bonds are created equal. Why do some grandparent/grandchild relationships seem stronger than others? Factors such as how far they live from each other, how often they can visit each other, and the number of grandchildren there are, can have an impact.

Dennis and Gerry Ginther of Owatonna have all of the above challenges to contend with in developing their connections with their grandchildren. The Gintners have nine grandchildren, some that live right down the street in Owatonna, some that live in other parts

of Minnesota and some that live halfway across the country in Seattle, Washington.

"For those that live far away and we can't see often, we are still in constant contact via email and Facebook," Dennis said. "For those that are closer, in fact anywhere in Minnesota, we try to attend their various extra-curricular events such as dance, choir, athletic competitions, music recitals, First Communion, Confirmations, and graduations. We really try to do it all!"

The entire Ginther clan does commit to one event a year that brings them all together, no matter where they live.

"Each summer we all meet at a resort in northern Minnesota," says Dennis. "Family summer vacations are our tradition."

Not only do they vary in location, the Gintners' grandkids range in age from 2 to 21. Dennis and Gerry say the age gap does not prevent them from finding activities they can all participate in."

“For instance, we ‘compete’ in an annual Family Best Ball golf tournament,” Dennis said. “And each fall we hold a draft party for the ‘Denny’s Den of Disciples’ Fantasy Football League. Kids and grandkids have teams entered, playing for small cash rewards and bragging rights.”

Some ideas for starting grandparent traditions include writing each of your grandchildren a letter, teaching them a skill, or even volunteering together.

Mary Brill, who now lives in northern Missouri, has four grandchildren in southern Minnesota. There is an entire state between them, but this is actually the closest they’ve lived to each other. Mary’s kids joined the U.S. Coast Guard and lived in California, then Washington D.C., then Hawaii, before settling back in Minnesota. When they lived in Hawaii, Mary went four years without seeing her grandkids, so that first visit back, she panicked.

“Even though I had talked to them on the phone while they lived away, I found I didn’t really know them very well,” she said. “The girls were 6 and 8, and I was sort of struggling with what to do with them. Then I saw a big floppy hat hanging on the wall by my back door, I grabbed it and told them to meet me in the clubhouse, which was our camper out back. I grabbed two more hats and the ‘Secret Hat Club’ was born!”

So, for the last eight years, Grandma Mary and her granddaughters collect hats and meet two or three times a year in the camper to trade hats and stories about life.



For the Ginthers, being grandparents also cements their relationships with their own children. “We get to share in their joy and excitement about the various recognitions of their children, just like we did with them when they were young,” Gerry said.

Dennis says grandparenting, though, definitely has perks that didn’t come with raising their own children.

“We get to spoil them and then turn them over to their parents for discipline,” he said. “Seriously though, it’s a joy just observing and supporting them from birth to adulthood - even through those ‘teen times’ and sharing with their parents the pride that they have become responsible, sharing, sensitive human beings with a good work ethic and a willingness to help those in need. Basically, as grandparents now, we just try to be available for advice and counsel when asked.”

As children grow and grandparents age, relationships can change. But experts say often that only makes the relationship stronger as many older children remain very attached to their grandparents. Grandparents are trusted adults that can offer an alternative “safe place” for teens and the stresses that come with that age group, as well as perspectives that may be different from their parents.

Tyler Hvindon, 16, of North Mankato is thankful for his grandmother who lives just 30 miles away in New Ulm. His grandmother, Candy Lindmeyer, makes it a point to see Tyler and his sister, 12-year-old Cait, at least once a week.

“If we need anything, she is there for us,” Tyler said. “Whether it’s helping us get ready for events, driving us places, or just listening when we need to talk - even if it’s about our parents!”

And that, experts say, is the key to keeping close ties with your grandchild, keeping the lines of communication open no matter the distance or the age. And experts advise to learn the technology that your grandkids may be using such as texting and social media. Kids likely won’t do the reaching out, so the onus is on grandparents to stay in touch.

Grandparenting, of course, changes from generation to generation. Grandparents today are different from their grandparents. So, while history and experience may offer some guidance, really just heed this good advice by Ginther; love and enjoy your grandkids. Embrace who they are, and what they may become.

“In the case of Grandbaby Ellie Ginther,” Dennis said, “she’s the smartest, happiest, and most loving 2-1/2 year old you will ever meet!”

Lisa Cownie writes from North Mankato. Her work can be found at lisacownie.com.

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