

¹ Let the Games Begin!

*Children's children are a crown to the aged,
and parents are the pride of their children.*

—Proverbs 17:6

When first learning that my husband and I were going to be grandparents, I had four words to say:

“Let the games begin!”

I love being a grandma. To my way of thinking, it's maximum fun with minimum responsibility. Yesiree! Gramma's my name—spoiling is my game. Imagine my shock to learn that some people take a bit more convincing.

Why? For one thing, it seems becoming a grandparent is unavoidably associated with aging. After all, the right of passage to grandparentdom is that you must first have children of your own. Or, as a dear friend of mine so sweetly expressed it, “Becoming a grandparent is your reward for not killing your own children.”

Even so, some of us are just not ready. We simply don't see ourselves as old, and in many cases we're not. Fact is, thanks to the miracles of modern medicine, hair color, and cosmetics, grandparents seem to be getting younger all the time. Even those a little farther down the road when the grands join the entourage often don't feel it or look it.

I can identify. If, as they now say, 40 is the new 30, then being only 45 when our first grandson was born, I barely met the criteria. To me that was—and still is—part of the fun. I love it when people say, “Why, you don’t look old enough to be a grandmother!” Even if they’re just being nice, it’s music to my egotistical ears.

The reality is that some of us are even young enough to still have a teenager or two at home. The last thing we want is to take on another toddler, even in small doses—or worse, end up raising our children’s children, something that’s happening more and more in this generation.

The majority of us, however, have arrived at the stage of life where we’re finally embracing the freedom of the empty nest. We’ve managed to get all our own kids out of the house and are living somewhat independently when—boom! We get the *big announcement*. How fair is that? Our affections, not to mention our pocketbooks, are again in danger of being compromised. It gives the term *baby boomers* a whole new meaning.

So what’s a potentially begrudging grandparent to do? Here’s a suggestion: lighten up! I’m here to tell you that even under less-than-desirable circumstances, this generation of grandparenting can be a glorious new game.

Consider one common way we combat the conflict and forestall the stereotype: the name game. Now instead of, as the old song goes, “over the river and through the woods to Grandmother’s house we go,” it’s “over the freeway and through the subdivision to Nana’s, Mimi’s, or Grammy’s condo.” And Grampa isn’t Grampa anymore. He’s Poppie, Papa, or, as our oldest granddaughter dubbed my husband when she was tiny, Poopah.

Judging from a recent e-mail I received from “akamima”—also known as Mima—these are names we wear like badges of honor, even incorporate into our e-mail addresses. What we’re saying to the world is “Sure, I may be a grandma, but I’m no ordinary grandma—I’m a groovin’ granny.” My friend Sharon Hoffman’s newest book is titled *A Car Seat in My Convertible?* That says it all!¹

Simply put, we're not your grandma's grandma.

Come to think of it, maybe that's why some grandparents go conversely crazy. They're out to prove that having grandchildren is *not* going to change their image, lifestyle, or outlook all that much. Consider the following anonymous poem I recently ran across.

*In the dim and distant past
When life's tempo wasn't fast,
Gramma used to rock and knit
Crochet and tat and babysit.
Gramma now is at the gym,
Exercising to keep slim,
Now she's golfing with the bunch,
Taking clients out to lunch.
Going north to ski and curl,
And all her days are in a whirl.
Nothing seems to stop or block her
Now that Gramma's off her rocker.²*

Trying to avoid any such embarrassing accusation, my husband and I settled quite happily into the standard sobriquets of Gramma and Grampa. Truth is, we don't care what our grandkids call us—as long as they call us often. The only thing I don't want to be dubbed is “Grouch”—though on our first family trip to Disneyland we purchased a baseball hat for my husband with an embroidered, labeled picture of Grumpy, the dwarf of the *Snow White* saga. There are reasons for that, however, having nothing exclusively to do with being a grandfather—or with this illustration, for that matter. This is merely my stream-of-consciousness stab at him for once considering it clever to announce publicly his difficult adjustment to living with a grandma.

But I digress.

In the great scheme of things, any name is infinitely better than being called Big Mama or Big Papa, as a childhood friend of mine called her grandparents. If memory serves, they were originally from Texas. Maybe everything is bigger and better there, but

somehow the mental image I got of giant-sized grandparents still seems a little scary to me. All that is to say that whatever name we choose to use, let's keep things in proper proportion.

Perhaps the biggest issue for some is that we can't believe our children are ready to be parents. It's that whole *Fiddler on the Roof* "Sunrise, sunset—quickly go the years" thing. Suddenly our babies are all grown up and having babies of their own. Where did the time go? Talk about a reality (mortality?) check. Not only are we not ready—it's hard to imagine that *they* can possibly be.

Face it—no matter how old our children get, somehow they never seem sufficiently mature in our eyes to mother or father children of their own. And many aren't.

But then again, were *we*?

I'll be the first to admit that raising my own children was not necessarily the wonderful, heartwarming experience others describe. Don't get me wrong—we had some great times and made wonderful memories. Still, looking back now, I see how ill-equipped I really was.

Being raised basically as an only child—my brother was 14 years older—gave me no practical experience in dealing with children, siblings or otherwise. On top of that, I was 18—barely more than a child myself—when I married my handsome minister husband. We then proceeded to have three babies in less than five years, all boys who were "all boy." I had no clue how to handle them.

Nor did I have much outside help. For most of our children's formative years, ministry assignments moved us hundreds of miles from either of our Midwest-rooted parents. Though I talked often to my parents by phone, it wasn't the same as living nearby, where I could occasionally dump—oh, I mean *ask* them to take—the kids for a while so I could have a much-needed break. Thank goodness for a few faithful baby-sitters.

To complicate matters further, living on a pastor's meager salary often necessitated my working outside the home, creating that

now-more-common-than-ever juggling act between church, career, and family. How I ever kept all the plates spinning, parental or otherwise, I don't know. Admittedly there were many things I would have and should have done differently. Somehow, though, we managed to raise our children without irreparably maiming or mistreating them. The choices they made after that were their own.

This brings me to another great thing about being a grandparent. It's like getting a do-over—a second chance at doing things right. Having learned from our own parenting mistakes, we now have experience that gives us more patience and better perspective. As Job, that biblical epitome of both, rhetorically puts it, “Is not wisdom found among the aged? Does not long life bring understanding?” (Job 12:12).

One would hope.

Surely, having been around the block more than once, we at least have a greater grasp on the time required for lessons to take root and grow. Hindsight helps us see the big picture rather than the isolated episodes we experienced with our own children. As a result, the anxiety and urgency we felt with them have dissipated somewhat.

Also, since grandparents don't have to be the main disciplinarians, we can offer objectivity—something that parents, due to close proximity, often can't. Best of all, when the grandkids get grumpy, we can send them home.

The bottom line is this: ready or not, here the grandchildren come. And once they start coming, the parents often don't seem to know how to make it stop. Starting with that first tow-headed heart-tugger, we welcomed three grandchildren in less than three years. To date, we have five biological grandbabies and a sixth by serendipitous assimilation. If our youngest, still-single son gets with the program, we could have more. I often wonder if he's postponing marriage on purpose after having made certain astute observations.

Truth is, once the grandkids come along, our kids are pretty much on their own. As my middle son once lamented, “Sometimes I think all you care about is seeing the grandkids. It’s like we don’t even count anymore.”

Hey—he had his chance.

And he might be right. Why else do we suddenly find ourselves running all over town trying to find just the right princess bed or pirate booty, even fighting off other parents or grandparents for the last most-in-demand toy or video game on the shelf? Besides the sheer joy of seeing their little faces light up, we want them to care about seeing us too. If that requires bribery, so be it.

This brings me to the greatest grandparenting news of all: it can be *fun*!

That’s why, a few years ago, anticipating a week’s vacation with the four oldest grands, I spent days transforming our backyard into a summer camp complete with tent, cots, and sleeping bags. The barbeque became a campfire for cooking burgers, dogs, and s’mores. From Build-a-Bear to bowling, daily activities and outings were painstakingly planned. The hand-painted sign tacked on the gazebo said it all: CAMP GRAMMA.

When the long-awaited moment finally came, Grumpy, er, Grampa and I excitedly welcomed their arrival with smiles and hugs, then eagerly took them on the grand tour of all we had constructed. In and out of the tent they crawled. Off and onto the cots they bounced. With all the hilarity we had hoped for, they embraced their required rations for the week, which included hand-made fleece blankets and pillowcases and, thanks to a fabulous gift shop find, grizzly bear slippers. I had spared no expense. It was going to be a great time.

So imagine my surprise that first evening to find them all camped out in front of the TV set, four pairs of grizzly bear slippers protruding at odd angles from wall-to-wall sleeping bags.

“How come you guys aren’t out in the tent?”

“We like it in here,” chirped the oldest.

"It-th dark and th-cary out there," lisped the youngest.

"Nonsense. Grampa promised he'd sleep outside. Say—where is Grampa?"

As if on cue, a loud snore erupted from a large, blanketed lump nearby.

Deserter.

"Okay," I conceded with a sigh. "Let's hit the hay. Tomorrow's gonna be busy."

"Gramma"—a sleepy voice drifted from the bunched-up bedding—"will you tell us a Bible story?"

"And don't forget to remember our prayers," called another contented camper.

How could I "forget to remember"? It had been our bedtime routine for every previous visit. Hmmm. Maybe I had gotten a bit too caught up in this new camping crusade.

Later, as I watched them sleep, a warm truth snuggled its way in. Being a Christian grandparent is a bit more than just fun and games, after all. It includes not only instilling self-confidence and providing a safe place when the world gets dark and "th-cary," but also driving down those all-important spiritual stakes as well. Quite simply, it serves as both an earthly and eternal assignment.

How important it is that, amid all the love and laughter, we also understand the weightiness of weaving heredity into legacy! For our children and grandchildren we provide a link to the past, an anchor in the present, and a passport to the future. That's why the choices we make in how we handle this new phase of life are so significant. As author Amy Tan put it, "If you can't change your circumstances, change your attitude."

For me, it meant making this determination: I will do whatever I can to remain an important part of my grandchildren's lives in hopes of making things better for them and their parents, not only financially but also emotionally and spiritually. How grateful I am to God that at my "ripe old age" I still have the health and energy to do that!

Guess this brings us full circle to that growing-old thing again. Considering the alternative, though, especially as it's related to wisdom and understanding, age isn't such a bad thing. So grow up, Grandma, and deal with it.

How do you do that? I'm glad you asked, for therein lies one of life's greatest adventures, one that we'll explore together in the following pages.

Certainly grandparenting has changed considerably over the years. What hasn't changed is that no matter how far away they wander, our own kids will eventually settle down and wind their way back home. We shouldn't be surprised, when they do, that one child or more soon comes trailing after them. As Grandma and Grandpa—or whatever we choose to call ourselves—we must anticipate their arrival by making a place not only in our homes but also in our hearts. As Martha Stewart would say, “It's a good thing.”

More important than Martha is the promise found in Proverbs 14:26: “He who fears the LORD has a secure fortress, and for his children it will be a refuge”—and, I might add, for their children too.

A fortress and refuge—that's Camp Gramma, where memories are made not only for a lifetime but also for eternity.

Let the games begin.

CAMP GRAMMA CLIPBOARD #1

Ready to tackle your own Camp Gramma? Here are a few tips from me and other experienced folks you'll meet later in the book.

- Martha Bolton's basic "Camp Nana" goes like this. She finds Vacation Bible School supplies at local craft or Christian book stores and buys as many of the fun projects as she can. Then, during summer vacation, she has all the grandkids over to make crafts and share the coordinating Bible story. Not only do they learn something and have fun, but it also gives them souvenirs to take home from Nana's.
- Should you decide to plan something a little more elaborate, remember that balance is still the key. You want to keep the kids from getting bored but not have them totally tuckered out by the end of the day. Or maybe you *do*.
- Setting a budget beforehand helps you decide how all-out you can afford to go. Most visits should probably involve only small-scale activities, saving the major theme park or faraway outings for special years. Either way, planning ahead allows you to save up or collect materials and fun stuff over a period of time, avoiding one big outlay of expense. This is especially important if not everyone lives locally and travel is involved.
- Stuck on a theme? Start by checking out Christian supply stores, catalogs, and web sites to see what Vacation Bible School lesson materials are being offered. Order only what you need to teach or illustrate the lesson, keeping in mind that you can often find coordinating clothing, crafts, toys, stickers, and so on at discount stores. Dollar stores and party places are good resources, as well as online companies like <www.orientaltrading.com>.

- Ann Gibson suggests starting when the children are a little older. In hindsight, age three is a bit too young for taking trips and for five- or six-day stays. “Or,” she says, “you could start with fewer days then add on.” Also take into consideration the ages and abilities of your campers when choosing activities and teaching materials.
- Another suggestion from Ann is to plan one service project for the week. It’s a great way to get your campers thinking outside the flaps. Connie Clements solved the too-young trauma by doing a one-day preschool camp for the three-year-olds as soon as their siblings went back to school. The promise of this made it a little easier for them to say goodbye when the older kids left for Camp Gramma.
- My time-tested schedule is to have a leisurely breakfast, followed by the Bible lesson and accompanying games, craft, or workbook while they’re still alert. If weather permits, we often do this outside on the patio table. Some type of outing or special activity is planned in the afternoon. The rest of the time can be filled in with whatever they like to do. A daily highlight is getting to choose one item from the “treasure trunk” I keep stuffed with toys and games. Usually this is something interactive.
- In case you still need specific theme ideas to get you going, some I’ve used are *Summer of the Monkeys*, *Summer of the Pirates*, and *Summer of the Spies*. The last two were based around Vacation Bible School themes I found online. It was easy and so much fun to find hats, stickers, bookmarks, and other related paraphernalia. For the *Spies* theme, each child got a bright plastic portfolio folder with everything needed to be Bible detectives—badges, magnifying glasses, notepads, pens, flashlights, and so on. For fun, I even came across crime scene tape and plastic “Uzis” that shot silly string. A *huge* hit!

- Bottom line: Don't be so locked into anything that your time together becomes stressful. The point is to make memories, not ulcers. Try to end each day with some type of relaxing spiritual reflection.

Now—put up the tents, pull out the stops, and start driving down those spiritual stakes!