



# The Grandparent

A NEWSLETTER FOR AND BY GRANDPARENTS

grandparents  
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## HOW DO YOU GRANDPARENT A 20-YEAR-OLD?

A GRANDMOTHER'S PERSPECTIVE ON NAVIGATING A TRICKY AND INCREASINGLY COMMON RELATIONSHIP

By Claire Berman. Originally published in *The Atlantic* on 22 January 2018

**I**s that your grandbaby?' asked the gate agent who checked Rachel through to the area for departing passengers. 'Sure is,' I said.

For long seconds, my husband and I remained at the gate in John F. Kennedy International Airport, waving goodbye. And then she was gone. Hard to believe that our firstborn grandchild was now a 20-year-old student heading back to the University of Edinburgh.

Otherwise, Rachel lives with her family in a rural village outside of Geneva, Switzerland, where she was born. Given the distance, we see them as often as we can, but not as often as we'd like.

Imagine our surprise and delight, then, when the phone rang last spring and it was Rachel, asking if she could come and stay with us in New York when school was out. It would be for a couple of months. 'I hope to get a job,' she said, 'but mostly I want us to spend more time together.'

There were lots of ways she could help: 'shopping for groceries, cooking some meals, seeing to it that Grandma gets out more and does her exercises ...'

We didn't need convincing. 'How soon can you be here?' we asked. We pulled out the trundle bed, laid out the welcome mat, and began counting weeks, then days, then hours till she arrived in June.

We were excited, but wary as well. It had been a long time since we'd had a young person living with us. Would we find ourselves waiting up until we heard her key in the door? What were the rules? What were our roles? And what if something should happen to her while on our watch? I found myself having dreams about my own grandmother,

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Bubbe Chana, who wore sensible Oxfords, smelled faintly of lavender, and would hold my hand too tightly whenever we came to a crossing. Like my bubbe, I wanted to love and protect my granddaughter. But I'd barely celebrated my eighth birthday when my grandmother died. Rachel was too old to be led by the hand.

Instead, we'd have to navigate a relationship that is more common today than it was when I was Rachel's age.

At around 70 million people, grandparents represent a bigger chunk of America's population than ever before, according to data released by the Census Bureau. That number is expected to go even higher as more baby boomers join the senior ranks. Americans are living more than half a decade longer than they were 50 years ago, too.

Many grandparents now have the ability to be in their grandchildren's lives for many years. But how does the grandparent role change as grandchildren age? With Rachel coming, we'd have to play it by ear.

We worked things out. Take the matter of navigating the city. Her first week with us, Rachel had an appointment to meet someone in Brooklyn. We offered to drive her. ‘No thanks,’ she replied. ‘Just tell me how to get there.’ On a piece of computer paper, my husband, Noel, drew a crude sketch of the subway system—highlighting the route she would have to take. They went over the instructions. ‘Wish me luck,’ Rachel said. When she reached her destination, she was to give us a call. The excursion went off without a hitch.

Day by day, Rachel grew more comfortable in roaming the city, and we grew more comfortable with having her roam.

Toting an enormous backpack, she would walk New York from the High Line to the Hudson, Chelsea to Chinatown, the East River to the Upper West Side.

We admired her resourcefulness. A help-wanted listing that she found online turned out to be for a job that was tailor-made for her: summer counselor at a children’s day camp on the Upper East Side. Monday through Friday, rain or

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shine, she would leave our apartment at just about the time the morning paper was being delivered, return home at half past three.

A Boston College study that looked at interactions between grandparents and young-adult grandchildren found that relationships do best when they are reciprocal, and our experience would confirm that.

Being with Rachel helped us to renegotiate the grandparent-grandchild relationship on a more equal basis. Rachel loves to cook—a skill she picked up from her mom and maternal grandmother. At least once a week, she would hit Trader Joe’s after work to shop for and then prepare a delicious dinner. (I actually asked for a second helping of tofu.)

Like many young people, Rachel is computer savvy—a skill that was much appreciated when her grandfather, who is technology averse, was tasked to edit a manuscript online. What might have taken him days of procrastination was solved in minutes.

Mostly, Rachel wanted Noel and me to be up and doing. We had become far too sedentary. ‘What’s the plan?’ she would want to know within minutes of stepping through the front door. Sometimes we had a plan, but more often we were less ambitious.

‘Is there a movie that you’d like to see?’ we might respond. Or: ‘How about going to 16 Handles for a frozen yogurt after dinner?’ We were open to suggestions.

‘I read about a great music group called Banda Magda performing in the Summergarden at MOMA later today,’ she announced one Thursday afternoon. ‘The museum is open until nine tonight. It’s okay if we don’t arrive there until six.’ Now that was a plan. We got to the museum with enough time to tour the Rauschenberg exhibit, then inch our way into the crowd at the concert. The music was stirring, the weather perfect, and the setting magical, an oasis within this busiest of cities.

New York has always been my kind of town. It’s where I was born and raised, went to school, met and married my husband, where we brought up our three boys. (The oldest is Rachel’s father.)

When others were heading for the suburbs, we headed for Central Park. ‘How can you raise a child in the city?’ our suburban and out-of-town friends frequently challenged my husband and me. I was tempted to reply, ‘How can you raise children anywhere else?’ To underscore my point, I wrote a guidebook called *A Great City for Kids*. What I learned from Rachel’s visit is that it’s *A Great City for Grandkids* as well, especially when they’re old enough to do some exploring on their own.

‘All you need is a MetroCard and a good pair of walking shoes,’ she said. Rachel liked New York’s diversity the most. ‘You never feel like an alien because you’re surrounded by people from all backgrounds and all walks of life. You’re seeing different neighborhoods and you connect with certain places, discovering things about yourself and other people,’ she told me. ‘I never get bored with it.’

Listening to her, I remembered having felt the same about wanting to take in all of the city. What I’d do was take the M5 bus, which then ran the length of the West Side from the Cloisters to South Ferry, exit at any stop according to whim, and then walk up and down the streets, trying to find each neighborhood’s special rhythm. What kind of people live here? Where do they work? Where do they shop and play? With Rachel, I began falling in love with New York all over again.

Her assessment of what made the visit such a success? ‘All three of us were open to change on our part and willing to accept change from others,’ she says. ‘It’s harder for a parent and child to have that dynamic. It’s something that a grandparent can do.’