

# The Grand Plan: Hear From Grandparents Who Provide Child Care



Grandparents fill a major gap in child care in this country, care that is otherwise unavailable or unaffordable to many. Grandparents in the U.S. care for 1 out of 4 children under the age of five. As such, they are a major influence on young lives, tied with formal child care in the number of children served.

In the spring of 2018, ZERO TO THREE and its partners at the Bezos Family Foundation and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation **commissioned a national survey of grandparents who care for grandchildren aged five and under.** We believe this survey to be the first of its kind to capture the needs and experiences of grandparent caregivers.

## Study Design

The Grand Plan survey included 1000 grandparents who provide regular child care for grandchildren aged five and under from across the United States, with oversampling of Hispanic and African American grandparents. We asked them about the joys, challenges, and needs of grandparents who share the care.

Grandparents participating in our online survey cared for a grandchild at least 15 hours a week. Approximately one-third (29%) shared a household among three generations. (Families in which the parent was not present were excluded from the survey.)



## The Powerful Pull of Love and Duty

Grandparent respondents almost universally agreed it is the pull of both love for their adult child and grandchild and a sense of duty that are the key drivers of their decision to provide care for grandchildren. 98% of respondents say they love being a grandparent. 94% say they love caring for their grandchildren, and 89% say they're satisfied with the current caregiving arrangement.

For most families (8 of 10), the caregiving arrangement is not financial. Grandparents feel rewarded by intangibles like spending time with grandchildren on a regular basis (89%), getting to influence and shape their early experiences (76%), and ensuring that their grandchild gets the best care (74%).

## Yet Challenges Exist

But not all is rosy, all the time. Almost half (48%) of the grandparents surveyed feel some level of disagreement/tension between generations concerning child care issues like handling tantrums (31%), navigating mealtime (27%), and managing screen time (27%).

**For 8 of 10 families**, the caregiving arrangement is not financial.

Caring for a young child—even one you love deeply—can be exhausting. 2 of 5 grandparents say the job of caregiving is tiring. 1 in 5 say it's stressful.

Even so, most grandparents have faith in their ability to do the job right. 89% say they are happy with the quality of care they provide. Grandparents say they have more patience (70%) and a clearer sense of what's important (67%) than they did when raising their own children. But many (74%) agree it's scarier raising kids today because there's more danger and violence in the world.





## Unlocking Points of Difference

While we found nearly universal appreciation of the experience of grandparent caregiving, differences emerged when we examined the data by subgroup, particularly in the areas of perceived stress and resolution of child-rearing disagreements.

- **Multi-generational households.** In multi-generational households (in which grandparents, parents, and grandchildren live together), grandparents reported experiencing more stress (26% vs. 19%) and a more complicated relationship with their grandchild's parents (57% vs. 45% report tension/disagreements).

According to a new Pew Research Center analysis of U.S. Census data, one in five Americans lived in multi-generational family households in 2016, the highest percentage since 1950. (Note multi-generational households as defined in this analysis included two or more adult generations, or grandparents and grandchildren younger than 25.) Asian American families were most likely (33%) to live in multi-generational households, followed by Hispanic families (27%) and African American families (26%).



- **Hispanic households.** Hispanic grandparents (60%) reported more tension between generations than did grandparents in the survey as a whole (48%). This finding invites further research to explore the stressors associated with living in multi-generational households and the challenges of assimilation.

Hispanic grandparents reported more interest in caregiving information and were more likely to search for information on the Internet. This finding echoes that of our 2018 [Millennial Connections](#) survey, in which Hispanic parents were also more likely to seek information online than were parents in other groups.

- **African American households.** African American grandparents are more likely to report their caregiving involvement is driven by their perceived role within the family as well as a sense of duty than are grandparents in the total population. For example, 59% of African American grandparents agreed with the statement that, "It's my job to help my family if they need it," as compared with 54% of

all participants. 37% of African American respondents also agreed with the statement, “My grandchild’s parents work non-traditional hours,” as a reason for helping out as compared with 29% of all participants.

In African American families, 70% of grandparents agree that it’s “my house, my rules” when it comes to caregiving for young children, compared with 56% of the total population. 65% of respondents shared that they do what they think is right with their grandchild even if they think their grandchild’s parents will disagree, compared with 56% of the total population.

Yet, African American grandparents did not report higher levels of tension or disagreements with their grandchild’s parents than other groups, and 75% say their grandchild’s parents look to them for child-rearing advice.

African American grandparents reported more challenges with practical matters like coming up with activities to enjoy together (27% as compared with 21% of the overall sample) or caring for a sick grandchild (26% as compared with 20% of the overall sample).

- **College-educated grandparents.**

Grandparents with a college education<sup>1</sup> are more likely to disagree with their grandchild’s parents on child-rearing strategies (58%) compared to grandparents with a high school diploma (44%). That said, they are also more likely to leave the final decision to the grandchild’s parents (74% vs. 64%) and to follow parents’ rules when caring for a grandchild (64% vs. 50%).

Grandparents with higher education levels also seek help and information at higher rates than their peers with lower education levels. 37% of college-educated grandparents (vs. 30% with a high school diploma or less) turn to the Internet when they have a child care question, and 35% (vs. 16%) agree that science-based websites can be a good source of information. This finding mirrors the differences in the information-seeking of parents found in ZERO TO THREE’s [Millennial Connections national parent survey](#).



<sup>1</sup>Education data includes all survey participants and includes African American and Hispanic families referenced above.

Note that income level was not predictive of grandparents' satisfaction with caregiving arrangements. Income is highly variable at this life stage; about one-quarter of survey participants were employed full time and one-quarter were retired. (Others were disabled, employed part-time, unemployed, or looking for work.)

## Outreach to Grandparents

Most grandparents (7 in 10) feel confident in caring for grandchildren since they raised their own children. But 4 in 10 agree that new research about child development can help them do a better job, and 3 in 10 wish they knew more about the brain development in young children.

Our survey suggests that grandparents trust those closest to them for child-rearing information and advice: relying on their own experiences (54%) in shaping their child-rearing approach, followed by guidance from their grandchild's parents (37%) and medical professionals (32%). The chart below shows the top sources that grandparents see as "credible" when it comes to child development and child-rearing information.

### TRUSTED CARE RING

*Most credible information and advice sources comprise a tight circle of trust*



Tiers of Trusted Information Sources	
Experiences raising my own kids	54%
My grandchild's parents	37%
Medical professionals/the pediatrician	32%
My spouse/partner	28%
Other family members/friends	26%
Other grandparents/peers	22%
My faith, religious leaders or religious group	19%
Teachers, other child care professionals	18%
Google searches	18%
My other children	16%

It's worth noting that when grandparents are asked **where they learn about child care resources**, the answer changes, with 65% getting suggestions from family and friends, 30% obtaining information from websites, and 27% consulting social media.

Given these considerations, and the fact that grandparent-caregivers provide care outside of early education systems, reaching grandparents can be challenging. Our research suggests that designing programs that include the elements below are likely to be most successful:

- Celebrate grandparents' contributions, both to their families and the larger community. They are the glue that holds a fragile child care system together, and many characterize caring for grandchildren as a role that gives their life new meaning.
- Use a light touch when offering child-rearing advice, honoring the lived experience of participants who've already raised children. (See our [Grandparent Guide resource series](#) for ideas.)
- Connect grandparents to each other and provide meaningful opportunities for grandparents to share experiences and advice.
- Encourage dialogue between generations about the joys and challenges of sharing the care. See our [Planning Tips for Sharing Child Care](#) resource to get the conversation started. These conversations can reduce conflict and strengthen inter-generational relationships.
- Finally, ensure program offerings address the areas grandparents are most interested in, such as the following:

Topics of Interest	
Educational activities	35%
Local activities/outings places to go	30%
How to reduce challenging behavior	30%
Foster self-control & social skills	28%
Effective discipline methods	26%
Help toddler be ready for school	25%

**Grandparents have the love.**

98% of our survey respondents told us they loved being a grandparent.

**We've got the resources.**

[ZERO TO THREE](#) has been supporting the healthy development of babies and toddlers for more than 40 years.

For more ways to engage grandparents, please visit [zerotothree.org/grandparents](http://zerotothree.org/grandparents).