



Build Impactful Memories with High-Quality Experiences

by Jill Kelsey

As a grandparent, you have the unique opportunity to plan thoughtful experiences for you and your family. By now, you may be fluent in thinking creatively, accessing risk factors, planning, and understanding different personality types. You also have a rich bank of childhood memories or other memories to draw from, whether it's a memory of a sunny day at the beach, a holiday gathering, picking a flower with your grandmother, or another memory or skill that you have honed over time. These experiences are not just memories, they are the threads that weave the fabric of your family's history. They are the shared moments of joy and laughter that create a bond that will last a lifetime. Now, it is time to put all of that to use.

There are ways that you can help create beautiful memories for you and your grandchild. It is important to note that making a memory does not necessarily require grandiose or expensive gestures. Instead, making good memories requires some of the following elements. The more of these elements you can squeeze into an experience, the more likely a positive memory will stick.

Add These Elements To Your Experiences With Your Grandchild

Presence

Presence is not just a vital element in any quality interaction, it is the key to building trust and secure attachment bonds with your grandchildren. It is the art of giving someone your undivided attention, of staying off your gadgets, and truly engaging with the person in front of you. We understand that this is less prevalent in the Gen-X and earlier age groups, but nevertheless, it is a growing trend. Presence requires eye contact, active listening, and genuine interest in the other person. Without these gestures, one may seem disinterested or ingenuine. A child will see right through this and may be less inclined to build trust or a secure attachment bond. The memories may reflect this.

Eye Contact

Eye contact is a powerful and personal form of communication, particularly for children. Observe any young child, and you'll notice how often they intentionally seek eye contact with their caregiver. It's their way of seeking reassurance and feeling safe. When they know you're watching them, they feel empowered to explore and be curious, knowing that someone is there for them. This builds trust. Children often seek eye contact before and after any action, and they love to be watched. So, when they excitedly exclaim, 'Watch meeeeeee!!', be sure to give them your full attention.

Add These Elements To Your Experiences With Your Grandchild (cont.)

Novelty/Newness

To a young child, everything is a new adventure. The beauty of sharing your favorite hobbies or activities with your grandchild in an age-appropriate way is that you both get to experience it with a fresh perspective. You get to witness their 'Ah-Ha!' moments and curiosity, and in turn, you also get to relive the excitement within yourself. Observe their responses. Ask them questions that engage their five senses. This active participation not only makes the activity more enjoyable but also deepens the bond between you and your grandchild. If you share your skill or activity, discuss it in detail so that your grandchild can take it all in. Don't worry about using simplified language. Let them hear the jargon and terms appropriate for the activity, other than the profanity often accompanying specific trades, of course.

Laughter

While we know that time quickly passes when having fun, science has also proven that we learn more when having fun, too! The more you can laugh, create curiosity, and be silly with your grandchild, the better. Let your hair down a little. Let out those funny faces, silly words, and sounds, even if you are usually prim and proper. Fun is more fun to a child than rigidity. Fun also entices the child to seek more time with you. You can still be proper and teach manners with a silly, themed tea party. It is all relative. Pay attention to what makes your grandchild laugh. Dad jokes, welcomed tickles, silly drawings, making funny faces, and playing with giant bubbles together are all great places to start.

Add These Elements To Your Experiences With Your Grandchild (cont.)

Nature

Children are inherently drawn to the natural world, whether it is playing outside or interacting with animals. Nature offers the elements of surprise and unpredictability, tactile stimulation and highly sensory-infused environments and experiences.

Here is an example of an early memory that can prompt a fun experience or conversation:

"One of my early memories involved an exploration of a North Pacific beach. I encountered sea squirts for the first time, gooey little creatures buried in the sand with a small opening at ground level. My father had encouraged me to touch it gently with a stick, and, much to my surprise and glee, it suddenly squirted sea water 3 feet into the air!" ~Anonymous

Sharing your love of gardening, house plants, grooming a beloved pet together, or observing a bird or insect at length can also be a way to experience nature, even for those with limited access to it. You can glean valuable information from simple observation. A lot of questions can be created and answered. Who knew a house fly was so interesting?

Add These Elements To Your Experiences With Your Grandchild (cont.)

Encourage Interaction With Words

If you can explain what you are doing and why during an activity with your grandchild, the child will begin to see the importance of internalizing the details. Ask the child about their preferences and what they like about "XYZ." What color looks best to them? Which flower is their favorite and why? Seek to discover your grandchild's current preferences (because they change now and then) and find a way to include one or more of them in an activity. But be sure to include something new. The only way to learn something new is with exploration and not always doing the same thing just because they like an aspect of it.

Movement

Young children are very active. If you can get them to move around in fun ways, they will develop the right side of the brain. Combine movement with higher cognitive tasks like listening or making choices, and you can encourage even more neural development and brain hemisphere balance. This is great for overall development. Mix in some music play as well, and you will also help the brain hemispheres to communicate with each other better. Drumming is great for small children in this regard or playing with water-based instruments outdoors.

While you may or may not be physically inclined or able, you can still facilitate movement play by playing games like "Simon Says" and "Red Light Green Light" or work together to create a fun and safe obstacle or activity course. Change things up by giving them choices. Do they want to hop on one leg or spin in a circle? Or both? Have them occasionally do the "Dead Bug" pose for a break in the action. The Dead Bug pose is done by having them lay on their back and put all arms and legs straight up in the air, then hold very still for a minute or two. Whoever is the dead bug the longest wins.

Add These Elements To Your Experiences With Your Grandchild (cont.)

Engage All of the Senses

When planning experiences, try to find a way to include the senses of smell, touch, taste, sight, and sound. For many of these, you can simply draw attention to the senses. Ask them to describe something. How does it smell or feel? Ask them to identify a sound you are making behind a barrier, identify food by feeling it with a blindfold on, or identify a spice by its smell with their eyes closed.

A note on smells: perhaps you frequently make pies. If so, the smell of fresh-baked pie may become associated with you in your grandchild's mind and memories. This is also the case with other distinct smells like fresh cut grass, certain spices or fragrances, or less desirable smells like pet urine or cigarette smoke. Do you want them to think of you when they smell jasmine? Clay? Fresh-cut wood or grass? Horse saddle leather or barns? Tobacco? A litter box? A trash can? You decide.

As you verbally interact, point out textures of surfaces, shapes, or colors of different items. Encourage a sampling of different taste sensations like sour, sweet, or bitter. Which do they prefer? What is their second and third favorite?

Grandparenting From A Distance

If you are engaging with your grandchild from a distance, it may be tricky to do some of these things. But with modern technology, making a video call and interacting online is easier than ever. Just keep these elements in mind. You can still offer verbal cues and presence from a distance. If distance is a problem, taking a purposeful and gently proactive role in connecting with your grandchild is essential. If your son has a child, he may not initiate visitations. Generally, the mother of the child often naturally initiates visitations with her own mother more frequently. Have a positive conversation with your son so that you can increase visitations.

One problem that may pop up in a remote call is that the child may not know what to say. When you call, have a few questions handy that require more than a yes or no answer. You can also get creative and play with puppets or read a book to your grandchild. This can take the expectation of needing to talk down a notch and allow your grandchild to warm up to you. After reading the book, there is an opportunity to open up a conversation about the story. The conversation can also segue into sharing your story-relevant personal memories or experiences. Or, ask your grandchild if they have experienced anything similar to a character in the story.

Connect regularly in whatever way works best in your circumstances. Being fully present with your grandchild for that cherished time and encouraging various interaction routes will significantly increase the bond between you and your grandchild, no matter how near or far you are from them.

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