



worry: this book isn't going to try to teach. Rather, it's intended to offer some information on the pleasures to be enjoyed and the pitfalls to be avoided. And it's not dogma presented from some expert, but largely the views and experiences of the real experts, those modern grandmothers and grandfathers who took the trouble to fill in our questionnaire, as well as those whom we talked to informally, making over 100 responders in all. Many of them also wrote about their experiences and discussed these with us. And be warned: we also interviewed some 50 grandchildren, who wrote about and talked about their experiences with their grandparents. So the book includes a small selection of 'consumer' opinions too.

Any book is bound to be based to some extent on the life of the author, and this book is no exception. As the father of three children, and grandfather of seven grandchildren, four of whom live overseas, I've also drawn on my own experiences of grandparenting. Some of these experiences appear as personal comments, while others (perhaps fortunately) will be recognised only by my family.

The book itself is divided into different chapters, or themes, but of course there's no need to read them in sequence: any one can be dipped into when needed. To put matters in a nutshell, the relationship with your grandchildren can be a wonderfully happy one, and a little forethought helps to ensure that it will be. And happy grandparenting!

## CHAPTER 1

# Little Beginnings and Big Moments

**"When your new little grandchild holds your little finger in his little fist, you're hooked for life."**

### Hearing the News

So you've had that phone call at last. They've rung with the glad tidings, and you're really going to be a grandparent. You've been waiting – how many years? – and you've been so good about it, so patient. You haven't dropped any hints, haven't said how pleased your friends are with their new grandchild, haven't wondered pointedly what they're doing about it, or complained to your friends about how slow they are.

Now those pleasant images of little darlings running around once more, asking to be cuddled, or wanting to be thrown up in the air and caught, those images will be real. That wonderfully infectious childhood laughter will ring round the house again. You can muse wistfully over those happy shots of your own children when they were little, dust down those old toys up in the attic, bring out those old books you used to read to them. You can – must – tell all your friends, break the good news over a coffee, perhaps hold a little party. Hey, it's exciting! Many many congratulations!

### Rethink

But wait a minute. Just pause: let a tiny glimpse of the other side cast the tiniest of shadows on this idyllic picture of yours. Have another look at those old photographs. That happy shot of little



Jack playing on the beach – wasn't that when he dropped his ice cream in the sand, threw that terrific temper tantrum and couldn't or wouldn't be comforted? It spoiled everybody's day out: remember that? And that shot of little Sophie, hand in hand with you, going off to the shops – wasn't that the day you turned round to find her having a call of nature in the middle of one of the supermarket aisles? Think how embarrassed you were by the black looks of those fastidious assistants who came to clean it up.

Yes, having little children in the family again isn't all sweetness and light. But of course, this will be different. They won't be your children: you'll be a grandparent – the parents have all the responsibilities and you have the enjoyment. Hm: not entirely true. After all, Jack and Sophie could well have been with their grandparents when those situations blew up.

There are a few grandparents-to-be who may be apprehensive, and worry about the effect that a grandchild may have on their lives. Pause for a moment and remember the statistic quoted in the Introduction: more than three-quarters of us become grandparents at some time in our lives. So most of us have stood where you are standing now. And most of us grandparents feel that the presence of a new arrival in the family, the changing relationships with our children, the whole new set of experiences that a grandchild brings, all of this has enriched our lives immeasurably.

When a grandchild is born, we enter a new relationship with a new little person. It will have its moments, like all relationships. So we can't expect a wonderful, beautiful fairy story all the time. But if we're prepared to brush up those old qualities we honed on our own children, the patience, ingenuity, tolerance and so on... and top them all with the lashings of love we feel, the awkward moments will be very few and far between.

## Help!

Yes, they really have rung: pregnant at last. The first glow of pleasure floods through you. Your own child is starting a family, just like you did all those years ago. The words, the warm response, jump to your lips before you even think about them.

“What wonderful news!”

What did you think of when you heard the news? Did your thoughts flash back to when you first started a family? Or was your first thought one of doting grandparents playing with happy babies? Or of enjoying family Christmases with children again? Or did you have at the same time a slight sinking feeling, as you began to wonder how your children would cope? Times are different now, and both parents are probably leading busy working lives. Will both new parents want to follow the modern trend, and get back to their jobs as soon as possible? You remember well the demands and responsibilities of bringing up children, how they filled your life. How will the new parents be able to fit these in with the demands of their work?

Delight and slight apprehension are both entirely natural reactions. And you wouldn't be human if you didn't wonder what the news meant for your life, too. But you're a generous person, and the words flow out:

“Oh we'll help you, we really will!”

Let's think of your offer to help. Help with caring for the baby? Help in the house? Help financially? Help.... What exactly did you mean, and more importantly, what did the offer of help mean to the parents?

## Early Interference

First, is an offer of help what the parent-to-be wants to hear?



Probably. Yet it's worth remembering that some young couples have this happy illusion that they don't need any help. You know the sort of thing; 'Oh we're not going to let the baby change our lives at all', said with the confidence of youth. They'll learn, you say to yourself, as you bite your tongue and smile at them. I recall the couple I met feeding their six month old baby half way up Cradle Mountain, New Zealand, in a heatwave. The baby wasn't going to make them change their backpacking holidays: no way. Admiration for their independence was mixed with worry about the effect of the hot sun on the baby, who next day was quite dangerously ill.

But there are some parents-to-be who are not just proudly independent, but genuinely suspicious of help, fearing it might turn into the dreaded interference from the grandparents. They may want to bring up their baby in their way, a different way, a modern way, uncontaminated by what they see as old-fashioned routines and ideas. So tread carefully before offering unconditional assistance.

And you'll be far too wise to try to force help on the new family. I recall the story of the grandparent who was so determined that *her* grandchild wasn't going to be placed in a creche, that she insisted on coming to stay and look after the baby while the parents worked. What a wonderful offer, the parents thought at first. Before too long, grandma gradually began to run the household, they felt their lives were not their own, and the inevitable explosion occurred.

### Early Commitments

And what if the parents-to-be are sensible, and want to use any offers of help that fit their needs? It's worth wondering what they imagine your offer means. Does it conjure up thoughts of grandparents paying for little Joseph's education? Or 'grandma's' as a

place where a child can be left every day while mother carries on with her career as before? Or of grandpa always being around to meet the youngster from school, a lesser duty perhaps, but an obligation nevertheless? The parents-to-be may not yet have thought through the sort of help they'll need. (We touch on some of these issues in Chapter 7.) But now, right at the beginning, you might want to think carefully about the kind of help that you both want to give and are able to give.

So at the right moment, it's important to talk about help, rather than offering a fully comprehensive insurance policy immediately. Perhaps 'accidents and emergencies only' might be a more suitable arrangement for some grandparents. Or some sort of intermediate arrangement might fit some situations better. 'Negotiations' sounds an unfeeling word to use for the start of a wonderful new relationship, but it's usually wiser to talk sooner about how much help you might be able to give, rather than having to disappoint later.

Exciting times; times when the relationship with your children begins to change. Yes, they're still your children, but they've matured: they're about to become parents too. They're also going to become experts in child-rearing, and so they may begin to treat you on equal terms, as fellow adults. Enjoy it!

### So, to summarise:

- The news of a grandchild-to-be is one of life's very exciting moments: enjoy it, share it with your friends!
- Prepare now for a life enriching set of experiences. Talk to other grandparents about the changes in their lives. Read some of the books mentioned in the Acknowledgements. Make a note of the Grandparents Association (also in Acknowledgements) for future reference.
- Don't get carried away: remember little children aren't always angelic.