

Mentoring Your Grandchildren

By Clare DeGraaf

Mentoring grandchildren? Do grandparents even do that? If spiritual mentoring is *intentionally* passing on to another person your love for God; the wisdom, knowledge and life skills you've learned to help another person be spiritually, relationally and emotionally healthy, then the answer is, yes! In my experience there are three types of grandparents:

- **Passive** – very little involvement in the lives of their grandchildren.
- **Active** – fairly involved and interested in their grandchildren's lives – what we'd generally call good, traditional grandparents.
- **Intentional** – grandparents who, in coordination with their grandchildren's parents, are working purposefully and intentionally to pass on biblical knowledge, wisdom and model Christian character to their grandchildren.

If you want to be a more intentional grandparent, or would like to help your own parents be more intentional in the lives of your children, then please read on.

Intentional grandparents see their role in the lives of their grandchildren beyond hosting birthday parties and holiday gatherings, showing up at school programs and providing occasional babysitting services. They are praying through and planning how they can supplement and support what the parents of their grandchildren are doing or ought to be doing to inspire their children to be true followers of Jesus.

My wife Susan and I have 13 grandchildren all living within five miles of us, so obviously that helps. It also helps that Susan is Super-Nana, so she makes me look good and inspires me to do better. Finally, while most grandparents think their own grandchildren are exceptional – *ours actually are!* (So, we've got that going for us.)

The following is a list of things Susan, I, and other grandparents have done to be more intentional grandparents:

1. **Nana Mondays.** My wife picks up one grandchild every Monday after school for about two hours and spends that time having *purposeful* fun. They've gone to museums, orchards, ice cream shops, bookstores or just back to our house to make a pie or cookies. (Yes, even the boys!) But it's always an activity that encourages conversation.

In preparation she prays about and often has discussed with their mothers what that child needs today. Has this grandchild been asking questions, expressing fears or have they been acting out in inappropriate ways? Susan then will often share stories of similar frustrations or fears she or perhaps their own parents had, to help a grandchild process their emotions. Often she'll end up praying about these issues with our grandchildren, or for them at the end of their time together. Intentional fun.

2. **Papa School.** Every few years, for a few weeks or months I'll conduct Papa School. Our older grandchildren 7-13 come over to the house after school and I'll teach them something. I've

taught them history, social issues from a Christian perspective, the framework for a Christian worldview for children (I'll blog about that in the future.) and basic theology (what Christians believe and why). (I've used some great material from www.relationalconcepts.org. Once on their site, go to Study Books and see their excellent material for children.)

We've read the Bible together and discussed it and talked about tough issues such as why good people suffer or what happens after death – whatever they want to talk about or whatever I feel led of God to tell them. I don't always have the answer, but if I don't tell them I'll study it and discuss it the next time we're together.

The parents of our grandchildren have some different theological views on some issues, so I try to be very careful to support their positions unless I get permission to teach a different view. An intentional grandparent never wants to undermine or discredit the parents.

- 3. Camp Cousins.** For the past three summers, I've led Camp Cousins. I take anywhere from 3-7 of our grandchildren on these two-day, one night survival camps each summer. We build lean-tos, cook over an open fire, I teach first aid, lashing, using a compass and basic outdoor skills. It helps that I was in Boy Scouts for 13 years, but I really don't like to camp. The only reason I do it is to get closer to our grandchildren and teach them the values of cooperation, planning, and getting work completed before playing.

Additionally I plan several things of a spiritual nature I want to talk with them about during our time together, talking about it either on the drive up, or around the campfire or both. The priorities I want them to connect the wisdom of God to everyday activities.

If time or outdoor experience is a problem for you, consider taking your grandchildren for short hikes in the woods identifying trees, birds, animal tracks, or hunting or fishing with you – almost anything, but with a purpose.

4. Connecting with our Grandchildren's Friends.

My wife, Susan, in particular likes to connect with our grandchildren's friends. Last month she took several of our granddaughters and a couple of their non-Christian friends to see an evangelistic play at our church. They got all dressed up, went out for a simple dinner, then to this play. Afterwards they discussed what they saw and heard and it was obvious that one girl had never before been exposed to the gospel. Susan had more in mind than a fun night out. She wanted to provide a vehicle for our grandchildren to expose their friends to the real Christmas story – *intentional grand parenting*.

Other Simple Ideas

- 1.** Take walks or drives with your children or grandchildren around the city you grew up in or you're living in now. I've taken our grandchildren to see some of the houses their parents lived in and I'll tell stories of good memories we had as a family there.

Also, I've taken the older grandchildren to neighborhoods they've never been to before. I explain how the neighborhood has changed and why. Why do ethnic groups tend to live together? Is it a choice or economics? I talk to them about how the sin of racism has divided people, even Christians. Don't just

show, but explain why – why people make or are forced to make the choices they do.

2. Read stories to them of some Christian heroes, martyrs, missionaries and evangelists. I'd suggest *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*, by Ruth Tucker. Or read the children's edition of *Pilgrim's Progress* to them.
3. Tell them as many stories as you can of ordinary Christians you admire and tell them why. Your choice of stories and your passion in telling them communicate how much you value the virtues you hope they'll emulate.
4. When we're with our grandchildren we try to "fast" from all electronic devices. No iPods, hand-held games, iPads, – nothing that could interfere with interpersonal conversations. (I do keep my phone on to keep in touch with parents, but I try to not receive calls or read email when we're together.)

If conversation doesn't come easy to you, tell them stories of their parents growing up, or of a frustrating situation your family experienced and how you handled it. If you handled it poorly, tell them. And, share with them how you should have dealt with it. In my experience, our own children learned as much from my mistakes honestly admitted, as from my good actions.

A few years ago I had this thought; when I was with my grandchildren; I wasn't just being a good grandparent. *I was actually teaching them how to be an intentional grandparent themselves when they grow up!* Whether good or bad, they were taking their cues from me! *"Train up a child in the way they should go and they will not depart from it."* Proverbs 22:6

Susan and I aren't super-grandparents. There are times we're simply too tired or busy to do all we'd like to do. This summer I got busy with the final edits of my book and I only took half of our grandchildren who could have gone camping. And Susan misses some Nana Mondays. Life happens. Nevertheless, we have as our goal to be very intentional about our role as grandparents and we love it!

One word of advice. Please don't use this blog to beat up your parents to be better grandparents. Rather, use some of these ideas to encourage your parents to think about being more intentional grandparents, if they aren't.

Question: What things have you done, or you've heard others do to mentor their grandchildren?