

# THE GRANDPARENT EFFECT

STORIES FROM A QUIET REVOLUTION

grandparenteffect.com Printed on January 2, 2023

## FIVE MYTHS ABOUT GRANDPARENTS THAT IT'S TIME TO TRASH

JUNE 16, 2016

Categories: Rants

Tags: Ageism, Grandparents & grandparenting, Grandparents as babysitters, Grown-up grandkids, Longevity, Money, Multigenerational households, Myths, Parents & grandparents, Parents & parenting

Let's ditch the stereotypes and start embracing the truth instead.

### 1. Grandparents are old.

Some are. Most aren't.

As of 2010, 54 percent of American grandparents were younger than 65, and 80 percent were younger than 75, according to the [MetLife Report on American Grandparents](#).

And, contrary to popular belief, most Americans with adult children aren't waiting an eternity for their first grandchild.

According to a [study](#) published last year, 73 percent of American mothers become grandmothers by age 55, while 67 percent of American fathers become grandfathers by then.

### 2. Grandchildren are young.

Some are. Many aren't.

As of the end of the 20th century, more than 75 percent of American 30-year-olds had a living grandparent, and more than 20 percent of 40-year-olds did, according to [estimates](#) by demographer Peter Uhlenberg of the University of North Carolina.

It was a very different story at the beginning of the 20th century, when people didn't live as long and grandparenting careers were shorter. In 1900, only 21 percent of 30-year-olds had a living grandparent and a mere 1 percent of 40-year-olds did, says Uhlenberg.

### 3. Grandparents play a smaller role in children's lives than they used to.

Nope. In general, they play a bigger role now than in the past, scholars suspect.

In fact, writes Uhlenberg, “it is likely that grandparents play a more significant role in the lives of children now than ever before in history.”

Due to increases in longevity in the developed world, children have more grandparents than they used to, and due to decreases in family size, grandparents have fewer grandchildren, which means they can lavish more resources on each of them, explains Uhlenberg.

Moreover, since more mothers are working and more parents are single, “older family members are an increasingly important source of financial, instrumental, and emotional support,” according to sociologists Sara Arber and Virpi Timonen, authors of the recent book [Contemporary Grandparenting: Changing Family Relationships in Global Contexts](#).

In the United States, more than 10 million children, including one-quarter of all kids under five and 14 percent of kids ages 5 to 14, are watched by a grandparent at least once a week, according to [data](#) from the Census Bureau that was published in 2013.

#### **4. Grandparents depend on their adult children for financial support.**

No way!

These days, it's often the other way around: many parents depend on their kids' grandparents to help them pay the bills.

“The notion of adult children providing economic support for their ageing parents is obsolete,” writes Uhlenberg. Instead, “older people are frequently using part of their pension income to assist children and grandchildren who have needs.”

A recent [study](#) by MetLife found that 62 percent of American grandparents were helping to support their grandchildren financially, either directly or through gifts to the middle generation. Forty-three percent of these grandparents had upped their support since the onset of the Great Recession, which, on the whole, hit parents harder than grandparents, researchers say.

#### **5. Fewer and fewer children grow up with a grandparent in their home or nearby.**

Wrong again.

After declining sharply during the postwar years, the percentage of American children sharing a roof with a grandparent began rising again late in the 20th century.

Between 1992 and 2012, the share of children who lived with a grandparent rose from 7 to 10 percent, according to a Census Bureau [study](#). Researchers attribute the surge both to increased longevity among grandparents and to financial distress among parents.

What's more, "contrary to widespread belief," writes Uhlenberg, "no evidence supports an increasing rate of geographic mobility in the United States over the twentieth century."

In fact, in recent decades, Americans have actually become less mobile, according to an [analysis](#) by Federal Reserve Board that was published in 2011.

So it's unlikely that, on the whole, kids are living farther from their grandparents than they did a generation ago, and it's likely that they're even living closer.

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