

Building Relationships with Family Near or Far

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Time Together

- Encourage your family member to establish a ritual that they do with the child every time they get together – something as simple as going to the park to swing (no matter the weather), going for a walk to get an ice cream cone or working on a craft project together.
- Rather than bringing expensive gifts on each visit, encourage your family to bring simple things that they can DO WITH THE CHILD. Like puzzles, paints, a game, a book to read.
- Playing board games or card games together can be a nice way to interact. Your family will see your child's growing skills, and your child will learn about rules and fair play.
- Have your child spend time one-on-one with family members. It helps to build their relationship when you and other family are not there to distract them from connecting.

Gifts and Traditions

- Encourage family members to create traditions. One grandmother made every Halloween costume over the years, and the children had the joy of picking *any* character from *any* book or movie for her to re-create. One aunt plans her nephew's birthday party every year.
- Encourage family members to give gifts that showcase their talents. If they knit, sew, cook, take photos, or build things, then that gift has its own meaning, but also gives you a chance to talk to your child about all the cool things the grandparents know how to do.

Comforts of Home

Children are reassured by routine and predictability. One dad rarely visited his grandmother in England, but knew that when he did, there would be buttered bread and digestive biscuits. Another person had grandparents that lived nearby, and at one house, they would always find home-made taffy, coloring books and Reader's Digests. At the other house, there were always word-search puzzles and a collection of little ceramic animals they could play with if they were very careful. Encourage your family members to think about what the reliable treats will be at their house.

Common Interests

Find things your child has in common with family members and encourage them to share that interest. A preschool-age child and his grandfather spend a lot of time talking about trains, planes, and cars. A teenage girl and her aunt go on Starbucks runs and clothes shopping trips together.

Share family stories

- Talk to your kids about your childhood, your parents, what their lives were like when they were younger, what they do now. This helps to ground your child in the history of the family.
- Encourage family to share their memories of day-to-day life when they were young, and their memories of historical events. This gives your child a deeper understanding of the past.

Encourage your children to reach out to other family members for advice and support

- Let them know there are other adults in their life they can count on for wisdom and empathy.
- Building those connections when they're young can be a safety net for a teenager who may be more willing to talk to other adults about challenges than they are to talk to their parents.

Staying Connected with Family Long-Distance

Mail

Good old-fashioned snail mail is very appealing to children – they love having something tangible to open and look at. This doesn't have to mean a hand-written letter. A grandparent could send postcards, or an envelope with a few stickers in it, or a puzzle from a magazine, or the comics. One family I know visited grandparents many years ago and they loved reading the comics in the paper the grandparents subscribed to. Ever since then, the grandparents pack up the Sunday comics every few weeks and send them to the girls. When one of the children went off to college, the grandparents sent comics to them to share with their dorm mates.

Phone Calls and Teleconferencing (Skype, Zoom, Facetime...)

Phone calls are nice. But video calls are even better! Being able to see the child's face will be precious to your family. And for your young children, having the image of the face as well as the voice makes a huge difference in helping them to connect. Here are some ideas on how to make the most of calls:

- Prep your family member ahead of time with ideas for questions to ask that will help engage the child in a conversation. With a toddler, you might tell family to ask "what does a dog say? What does a cat say" and so on. With a teenager, you might clue in your family in advance that they should ask about a movie your child recently saw, or a trip you're planning.
- Prep your child ahead of time by reminding them what they know about that family member.
- Remember that toddler attention spans are short. Short but frequent calls are better for building relationships. A 2 minute call every day is more fun than 15 minutes once a week.
- Some people read a story book to the child over the phone / computer. This may be easier for a young child to engage in than a conversation is. They could read the same book every week and the child would probably love that! (When they visit, they can read it in person!)
- Check out this collection of ways to connect in an online conversation:
<https://gooddayswithkids.com/young-children-and-zoom/>

Recordings and Photos

- Search for "recordable storybooks" on Amazon, or at Hallmark.com, and you'll find several picture books that a family member can record their voice on, telling the story. In one family, the uncle recorded a Christmas story when the children were young. He passed away on Christmas Day a few years later, but every year the family gets to hear his voice.
- Film a family member talking or telling stories or giving your child a tour of their home or one of their favorite places. Your child can watch it again and again.
- Photos: have photos of family members around the house, and talk about those people often. (And not just formal portraits on a wall! Also have printed photos the child can carry around.)
- Take plenty of pictures when family members visit. Make a scrapbook. Review it with your child before the next visit.

Sources / Other recommended articles:

<https://lastingthedistance.com/long-distance-grandparents/>

<https://www.leisurecare.com/resources/long-distance-relationships-grandchildren/>