

The Grandparent - Grandchild Connection Striking the Right Balance for Good Health

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Grandparenthood is the reward, it’s said, for surviving parenthood. As grandparents, you get a “do over” where you get to be wiser, more patient, more in control, and more fun. Grandparents can have a tremendous influence on the health and well-being of their grandchildren, and surprisingly, vice versa.

Finding the Right Amount of “Grandkid Time” - Results of a recent study showed a positive impact on the health of grandmothers who spent time with their grandkids. The Women’s Healthy Aging Project found that postmenopausal grandmothers who helped care for their grandkids about a day per week had a lower likelihood of developing memory disorders like dementia according to memory tests. Had granddads been included in the test, it’s likely the testing results would have been similar say the authors. Good news, right? There is a point of diminishing returns, however. According to the study, there’s a limit to the amount of childcare a grandmother should provide. Women who spent at least five days per week caring for grandkids actually did worse on the memory tests. Ouch! But it’s possible they were in a more stressful environment and were filling in as full-time parents rather than grandparents.



Impacting Grandkid Health

Grandmothers, however, seem to return the “favor” for the wear and tear grandkids seemingly put on their cognitive abilities. Other studies have pointed out that grandkids raised by grandparents or who spent lots of time with grandparents were more likely to be overweight. Why? Maybe there was a little too much “spoiling” with candy and cookies. Do a few pounds matter? Due to a nationwide childhood obesity epidemic, we are now looking at the first generation of children who could live shorter, sicker lives than their parents due to chronic obesity-related diseases.

Grandparents are in a position to help reverse this problem. There are a number of factors:

Smart **Super** Snacks = Future **Super** Heroes



Grow **super strong**
and **super smart** kids
with **smart snacks**
like fruits and veggies

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too much “screen time”, not enough physical activity, processed foods, and the prevalence of sugary drinks in the diets of youth. If grandparents help limit these factors, that not only benefits the health of their grandchildren, but their own health as well. It’s all about balance.

Making the Most of Your Time Together

The temptation to ply grandkids with cookies and other sugary treats is strong. We leave it to the parents to say, “No, it will spoil your dinner”, right?

However, love is not a candy dish, says Vandana Sheth with the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. Making snack time a fun experience is the solution.

Creating fruit faces is a great way to get kids involved and bring out their artistic sides as well. There are lots of tasty healthy alternatives that grandkids (and grandparents) can truly enjoy.

- Among the better choices:
- Celery sticks or apple slices with peanut butter for dipping
 - Non-fat or low-fat yogurt parfaits layered with fresh fruit and granola
 - Fresh fruit smoothies – berries, bananas, and other seasonal fruits blended and chilled



- Whole wheat pretzels or whole grain crackers topped with low-fat cheese
- Mini pizzas made with a toasted whole grain English muffin, topped with marinara (or grandpa’s homemade spaghetti sauce) and low-fat mozzarella cheese

These healthy choices are not only good for grandkids, but for grandparents, providing an energy boost and lots of important nutrients.

Good Nutrition from the Very Beginning

One surprising factor in getting grandchildren off to the healthiest start in life is the support of grandparents in their daughter’s choice to breastfeed. Research overwhelming shows that breastfeeding provides numerous life-long benefits to the health of both babies and mothers. Breastfeeding fights off childhood diseases and helps lower the risk of obesity. While almost 90% of mothers in Lincoln start out with an intention to breast-



feed their newborns as recommended (exclusively for the first six months, then in tandem with the introduction of solids for the next six month), there is a sharp drop off at about the two month mark. Two key issues often cited by new mothers for this decline are difficulties with nursing while returning to work and lack of familial support for breastfeeding. Grandparents can play a huge role in helping babies start out healthy by supporting the nursing mom in their family.

The Importance of Being Active for Grandparents and Grandkids

A recent Pew survey found that a greater percentage of

adults over 65 report exercising than those in younger age brackets. If you’re not among the group involved in exercise, here are some reasons to consider incorporating fitness into your daily routine: According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the benefits of exercise include:

- Increased ability to live independently and reduced risk of falling and fracturing bones.
 - Reduced risk of dying from coronary heart disease and developing high blood pressure, colon cancer and diabetes.
 - Reduced blood pressure in those with hypertension.
 - Improved stamina and muscle strength, especially for those with chronic disabling conditions.
 - Reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression.
 - Improved mood and feelings of well-being.
 - Development of healthy bones, muscles and joints.
 - Controlled joint swelling and pain associated with arthritis.
- Grandchildren and grandparents have a lot in common when it comes to fitness. Both groups



need to exercise safely, especially guarding bones and joints. The solution is exercise strategies that are fun, safe and not too difficult. An easy start is to take a nature walk. Enjoy the outdoors while pointing out different kinds of birds, trees, and flowers. Turn on your favorite music and show your grandkids the steps popular in your youth and invite them to dance along. Go for a swim or a “swim walk”. Even if you can’t swim, walking across the pool is good exercise and easy on your joints. For more creative ideas, check with senior centers that offer fitness like those through Lincoln’s Aging Partners.

Grandparents and grandchildren can no doubt make each other’s lives better. The key is balance and lots of love.

