

GRANDPARENT DILEMMA

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On Boxing Day last year, my mother passed away after a two-month build-up – a great loss for me and my husband, and also for our six year-old daughter. What makes the loss so much greater is that Mum's death means that our child now has no grandparents at all.

It seems so young to already be missing out on that special relationship where “spoiling” is the key word, and as a parent I feel completely helpless to rectify the problem. Obviously, that's because there is no way to rectify it. I've made the occasional joking remark that we'll have to adopt a granny one day, but there's probably more than a grain of truth in the sentiment. I think it's really important for us all to have a special older person or people in our lives.

Sure, we've got a few friends who fit into the “older” category – parents of good, longtime friends whom we see occasionally – but they've all got their own families and grandchildren to spoil so I don't think we can hijack them on a permanent basis.

There's no doubt the loss of my mother has left a huge hole in my own life – I used to ring her every day and still have to remind myself regularly that I can't do it anymore – but I have equal concerns for the impact it will have on my daughter. She's too young to realise the full implications herself, but I'm sure as the years go by and she's reminded of the absence in her life of grandparents that she'll become very saddened by it at times. Her school has a grandparents' day once a year for some classes, so no doubt that'll be a difficult one to get through, and that's just one event in a future lifetime of grandparent-less events.

It's not like my daughter ever had a hands-on grandparent like so many of her friends do. I was born quite late in my mother's life and I left it even later to have my first and only child. By the time she was born, my husband's parents were long gone, as was my father, and Mum, at 81, already had a string of health issues, making it impossible for her to even hold our new baby without sitting down. I remember her saying at the time, “I just hope I live long enough to see her go to school.” Luckily, her health improved for a few years and that hope came to fruition, with her seeing her little granddaughter go through two very successful and extremely happy years of schooling. I'm very grateful for that at least. But I guess it's a life lesson for those considering leaving parenthood until later in life that your children have more chance of losing their grandparents while they're still very young.

I really hope my daughter remembers her “Nanna”. Of course, her father and I will need to be active in helping her do that. Luckily, we've got quite a bit of home video footage of my mother to help prod the memories, but even that will start to become less and less real as the years go by.

Another hope is that we do “acquire” a special older person in our lives eventually – not just for my daughter's sake so she can have a proxy grandparent but also for my own

benefit. There's a comfort you get from being with old people, and I sometimes find myself looking enviously at someone arm in arm with their elderly mother as they help her along. Old women using walkers particularly catch my eye, reminding me of my mother using one to help her get along after her legs had started to stubbornly desert her. Hopefully I won't be arrested for stalking little old ladies walking along the street! But I say to all of you who still have your parents around: don't take them for granted in your own lives or in your children's.

At my mother's funeral, a carer from the nursing home where she lived for her last two years said that Mum always enjoyed the visits from myself and my daughter, but that she couldn't understand why we'd want to bother visiting someone so old. It was kind of amusing and a typical thing for my self-deprecating mother to say, but in a way it broke my heart because it indicated her low sense of self-worth. Didn't she realise it was because she was "so old" that it made her special? Didn't she know that we found the memories about her exploits throughout her long life interesting because her experiences were so different from ours? I know I told her so but maybe I wasn't convincing enough.

In our society, we can often think of visiting parents and grandparents as a duty and something that's done for their sakes so they don't feel lonely. But now that my mother and our child's last grandparent is gone forever, I realise with enormous clarity that it's just as much for our sakes to keep in touch with those who've gone before us and who bring so much to our lives.

Approx. 900 words
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