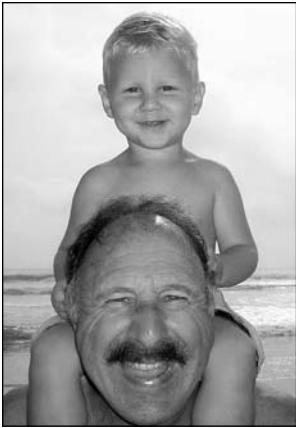


# Joys and Challenges as a Grandparent



*As more child and adolescent psychiatrists become grandparents themselves perhaps their empathy, understanding, and efficacy with grandparents in their practice will grow.*

## ■ Nicholas Putnam, M.D.

Among the extensive educational offerings at the 2008 American Psychiatric Association Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C. was a workshop entitled: *The Child Psychiatrist as Grandparent: Grand Joys and Grand Challenges*. I had become a grandparent for the first time twenty-one months earlier. This had already changed my life in profound ways. I decided to attend and was amply rewarded. The workshop was chaired by **Ellen Sholevar, M.D.**, and her husband, **G. Pirooz Sholevar, M.D.**, with the able assistance of **Diane Shrier, M.D.** The three panelists and the audience shared their personal experiences with grandparenting, with an emphasis on the “skills needed in parenting adult children who are parents.” In listening to the participants, I realized that the subject of “grandparenting,” whether as a child and adolescent psychiatrist or not, is rich and complex and worthy of much more attention than our profession has devoted to it thus far.

On the flight home I reflected on my own experiences with my grandparents and now as a grandfather. Many of us baby boomers will become grandparents during this decade. We all realize that current demographic trends mean that the vast majority of children born today will have relationships lasting many

years with grandparents and even great-grandparents. There are also significant numbers of children being raised primarily by grandparents. Grandparents, even absent grandparents, have an impact on the lives of their grandchildren and the converse is also true. For years I did not look forward to the prospect of becoming a grandparent because it would mean, among other things, that I would be *old* enough to be a grandparent and grandparents had always seemed *older* than I would ever want to be! Now, when I have a chance to take my grandson, Roan, who is an active toddler, to the playground and race around with him, I feel younger than I have felt in years.

Of course every grandparent and every family dynamic is unique. The role of grandparents depends on each family's history over the previous generations, the physical and mental health of the parents and the grandparents, social and cultural factors, personality issues, gender considerations (maternal vs. paternal grandparents), remarriages with “step-grandchildren” and “step-grandparents” and, of course, birth order. The first-born grandchild does often have a special relationship with the grandparents. Becoming a grandparent made me think again about the role of my own grandparents in my childhood and this, initially, at least, influenced my expectations

about becoming a grandparent. Cultural factors are very important. Decades ago a very large Chicago study of family constellations showed that black grandmothers had considerable success raising their grandchildren while their single daughters acted as breadwinners. This was not the case in white families where the mother was less comfortable in letting her own mother be the primary caretaker. Different cultures welcome the involvement of grandparents in very different ways.

Grandparents can be a great asset to their grandchildren. They can provide practical support from child care to car pooling, financial support ranging from indulgences to college funds, and emotional support, cheerleading and celebrating their beloved grandchildren. They can be crucial as back-up parents in special needs situations, such as the death, incarceration, deployment, or disability of a parent. They may have wisdom and perspective that the parents do not always have. They can provide for the continuity of family history, values, and traditions. Perhaps most importantly, they can play with their grandchildren. These playful times can range from games to fishing trips, from a walk to the park to a cruise to a tropical island. Regardless of their resources they can truly enrich the lives of their grandchildren and provide respite for parents who are spending increasingly more hours at work each day.



Grandparents can also become a burden on their children and grandchildren. If grandparents lose their health with advancing age, the parents, who are in the middle, may have to care simultaneously for young children and aging grandparents. Some grandparents are just plain

tired of raising children. Some seniors are busy starting a new life in their "Golden Years" after a tedious career or an unhappy marriage. Grandchildren today may find themselves going to Grandpa's wedding. Some grandparents can be meddlesome, critical, or intrusive. Some parents will actually move to a distant city to avoid frequent interactions with particular grandparents. Learning how to interact with their adult children when it comes to raising the grandchildren is perhaps the most important issue that grandparents face. As Dr. Shrier pointed out in the workshop, much of the time, giving advice, even if it is solicited, is risky business.

Grandparents need to learn that this is their children's opportunity to parent and a grandparent's role is to offer encouragement and support but not to control their own offspring's behavior. Rarely, but worth noting, grandparents believe that they and their grandchildren have a common enemy: the parents. This can truly inhibit the parents from being most effective in their role. Also, grandparents can compete with the "other" grandparents, their in-laws, over time spent with the grandchildren or over which values and/or cultural traditions are transmitted to this new generation. My grandson has me, Papa, in San Diego, and Nana and Popi in New Orleans. He has drawn us all together as we share a common love and a common descendant. When I look at my grandson, Roan, I think about all of the diverse characters and personalities that contribute to his genetic make-up. Among his great- and great-great-grandparents are an Army general killed in battle in World War I, an Armenian gardener toiling in Beverly Hills, a German woman who taught voice in Hollywood, and a Louisiana pediatrician who worked in Viet Nam for a while. Then again, we all look at Roan and marvel at what a unique character he is, and we are thankful for the freshness and novelty he brings to our family.

As I have found within my own family and my personal experiences over the past two years, the presence of grandchildren can bring a great deal of



meaning to the life of a grandparent. Being a grandparent can give one the chance to enjoy children without the same degree of responsibility they had for raising their own. They may see the grandchild as a chance to make up for past mistakes, to do things differently than they did with their own children. If they realize they were too rigid with their own children, they may be able to relax and enjoy a more casual relationship with grandchildren. Some grandparents enjoy the chance to just teach children again, whether it means helping a toddler behave at meals or teaching a teenager to drive. Grandchildren also give a grandparent hope that their own heritage may be projected well into the future, taking some of the bite out of the awareness of their own mortality.

As clinicians I think it is important we be aware of these issues. A family history should always include questions about

the grandparents. Child and adolescent psychiatrists need to learn when to include or not include grandparents in family evaluations and treatment. Some would say that if grandparents are living in the same household they must always be included. Some grandparents are the actual caretakers and will represent your best hope of implementing a treatment plan. While some grandparents can be very helpful, others are not so helpful or even obstruct treatments they do not understand or support. The more sophisticated the child and adolescent psychiatrist is when it comes to dealing with grandparents, the better the chance for a positive outcome.

While there are sometimes grand challenges to being the best grandparent, there can be no doubt grandchildren are a grand blessing! As more child and adolescent psychiatrists become grandparents themselves perhaps their empathy, understanding, and efficacy with grandparents in their practice will grow. And I hope that AACAP gives consideration to including the topic of grandparents in future AACAP meetings. ■

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## AACAP's Annual Advocacy Day is Friday, May 8, 2009

**Are you interested in learning more about advocacy?  
Do you want policy changes in Congress?**

Please join other AACAP members and family and youth advocates on Friday, May 8, 2009, on Capitol Hill to promote children's mental health issues. Advocacy Day 2009 provides a great opportunity to learn about the legislative process, develop relationships with your legislators in Washington, D.C., and to discuss the issues that most affect your patients and practice. The AACAP Department of Government Affairs will schedule your congressional meetings, teach you what to say and do during your meeting, and provide you with the policy materials to influence your message. For more information, please visit the legislative section of our Web site at [www.aacap.org](http://www.aacap.org).

***We hope to see you in Washington, D.C., next May!***