



KEEPING UP WITH THE

The bond between grandparent and grandchild is a precious one that deserves to be cherished and nurtured. Keeping those intergenerational bonds strong can add meaning, joy and form part of a healthy lifestyle to those senior years.

BY SHERALYN TAY



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hen 29-year-old Olivia Xu saw her grandparents' smiling faces on her computer screen, she burst out laughing in joy. She had just moved to Brisbane to further her studies and missed her family. "I was really happy and excited to see them on the screen!" she recalled. "Over here in Australia, I usually talk to them over the phone. Once, I asked my parents to put them on skype video because my grandma and grandpa were at my house. I think my grandparents caught on pretty quick once they saw me on video. I think it was something entirely new to them, but they were happy." Thanks to the internet, Olivia's grandparents, who are in their 80s, found a new way to keep the connection with their granddaughter alive.

Building a close relationship with one's grandchildren can also take other forms. For Mr Goh Seok Hiong, 69, it's in being a caregiver to his grandsons — Jeff, 9 and Jonathon, 12. The trim and smiling gentleman took a step back from his own business a few years ago and started to take on a more active role in caring for his grandchildren. "In helping to care for my grandsons, their parents can take on full-time work and are reassured that the boys are well cared for," he explained in Mandarin. But it's not just duty that drives him. "I naturally like to take care of children and I feel it's a blessing to be able to be close to them."

ONE OF THE KIDS

It's no surprise Mr Goh was named one of the Active Agers of the Year in 2008 by the Council for Third Age. To allow him to communicate better with his grandsons — not that he needs it — Mr Goh took up English classes. This active ager also takes time off from his busy schedule of classes and sports (he's active in picket ball, tai chi, and church choir) to pick his grandsons home from school. Then, he makes sure they have something to eat and supervises their homework. He even tutors his grandsons in the Chinese language. After school work is completed, the fun begins. "It's important to help the children relax a bit after all that homework, so I'll take them out of the house in the evenings for a break." ❖

GRANDKIDS

S I L V E R G L O W



Looking for ways to connect with your grandkids? The best way is to start when they are young and look for shared interests. Here are some ideas.

Visit Making an effort for visits, regular or otherwise, is important. If the visits are infrequent, anticipating and planning it can help make it special.

Stay in touch Call, sms, write, email — these are simple yet effective ways to stay in touch. Grandparents or grandchildren who may not be able to access email or a phone may like to record messages, stories or videos to each other.

Snap it Photos are great ways to keep close. Parents should display snapshots of grandparents at home, go through family pictures together, post them on the web or email them to each other. If family functions are few and far between, compile photos taken throughout the year onto a CD and play them when functions do occur — this can help update grandparents and the family of various events in their lives.

Write a letter It may be out of fashion, but we all still love receiving snail mail. Get the children to write letters to grandparents and vice versa — it'll help hone handwriting skills, composition skills and that special relationship.

Share history What did grandma do as a girl? How did grandpa get that cool relic? Sharing tales of one's younger days can help to build a connection with grandchildren and a sense of family history.

Do it together Share hobbies, special skills or interests. It can be anything: knitting, cooking, fishing, singing or sport. Even better, learn a new activity together! Explore the options at your community centre: yoga, cooking, foreign language classes — the choice is yours.

The key to having fun with your grandkids? "It's important to find interests that you both share and not force them to do things just for the sake of doing things together," says Mr Goh. For example, while Jonathan likes badminton as much as grandpa, Jeff prefers basketball. "It's okay to let them find their own interests and encourage them," the twinkly-eyed senior mused. In fact, they are so close that they banter, joke and even have mock battles — be it a badminton match or wrestling!

So throw away that notion that grandpa or grandma can't keep up. In fact, it was Mr Goh who introduced rollerblading to his grandsons about two years ago. And that's not the only sport this active ager is good at — he even cycles and runs with his grandsons!

A BOND ACROSS GENERATIONS

Establishing a bond between grandparents and grandchildren also has many benefits. For example, grandparents act as good role models and influences; and can help build a sense of family belonging, history and cultural heritage. Since grandparents are usually retired, they have more time to play, read and spend time with young children who need extra attention. This kind of dedicated attention can improve a child's developmental and learning skills in the long run.

Seniors can also benefit and gain a better sense of emotional and psychological wellness from interacting with their grandchildren. This builds a sense of self and adds meaning to the golden years. At the same time, keeping up with the grandkids has the benefit of encouraging seniors to get active! Babysitting young children or looking out for pre-adolescent kids can also help keep limbs limber and senses alert.

It does not take a lot to build those important intergenerational bonds, nor does it not matter much whether one sees a grandchild only once in a while. Parents play an important role in helping to nurture this bond. This can be through encouraging both generations to spend time together, and by also building closeness with their parents. The most important thing is to show how important the relationship is — a big smile, a warm hug, a special meal or effort taken to spend time together can make grandchildren feel special while they learn to reciprocate those feelings.

PRECIOUS MOMENTS

The occasional visit, trip to the supermarket, family outings or meals is what keeps Olivia close to her grandparents. "My grandparents are super cute and I love them very very much," Olivia shares.

You might also envy Mr Goh's special relationship with his grandsons. "My friends cannot understand why I insist on caring for my grandsons. They say: 'Come out with us; you've done your duty caring for your own children.' But I think they just don't understand the joy I get from being close to my grandsons. When I stay over, Jeff sometimes comes into my room and snuggles next to me for an extra five minutes of sleep. It's a happy feeling." As all parents — and grandparents — know, those spontaneous hugs, unrestrained giggles and carefree moments with a child are fleeting and all too precious — and should be cherished. What better time to enjoy these treasures than in one's golden years? +

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