

AARPBulletintoday

As Stress on Families Rises, Grandparents Give Grandchildren a Boost

Voices of experience can help teens and tweens through hard times

By: [Cynthia Ramnarace](#) | Source: AARP Bulletin Today | June 22, 2009



Peggy and Sam Harrington and their granddaughter Shawn. Photo: Courtesy the Harringtons

When Shawn Harrington, 16, of Lawrenceville, Ga., learned that a close friend was pregnant, the first person she turned to was her grandmother, Peggy Harrington. Peggy's response to Shawn's news was sobering.

"We talked for a long time," Peggy says, "and I asked her, 'What would you do?' I had her think about the things that she would have to give up. She couldn't go to college; she

couldn't go out and party; she couldn't travel when she wanted to. And she said several times, 'I never thought about it like that.' "

The conversation had a profound effect on Shawn's view of her friend's situation.

"My grandma told me that once you have a kid, that is your life, it is a decision that you cannot turn back," Shawn says. "She explained to me how important it is to make the right decisions about what you do, how you do it, and when you do it."

The Harringtons' experience illustrates the crucial role grandparents can play in the lives of their adolescent grandchildren. A [recent study](#) in the *Journal of Family Psychology* showed that children ages 9 to 18 with a strong grandparent bond have fewer behavioral problems and better social skills than those who lack that relationship. "Grandparents provide stability," says Shalhevet Attar-Schwartz, lead author on the *Family Psychology* article and a researcher at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. "They take on multiple roles for their grandchildren: caregiver, playmate, adviser, mentor and friend."

Perhaps at no time in recent history has this bond been more important.

Grandmother steps into the void

Consider these numbers: Nearly one-third of all children live in a single-parent household, according to the [national Kids Count program](#). Nearly 1 million marriages end in divorce or annulment each year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. More than 4 million children are living in blended families, reports the U.S. Census Bureau. And into these unstable family situations, mix in an economic crisis that has left more than 14.5 million Americans out of work, caused massive uncertainty about long-term job stability and increased levels of stress at home across the country.

Meanwhile, the number of teenage girls ages 15 to 19 who are getting pregnant increased for the second year in a row in 2007, reversing a 14-year trend, according to the CDC. Drug use among teens and tweens is also a growing concern. After declining for more than 10 years, the rate of marijuana use among eighth-graders leveled off in 2008. Eleven percent of 13-year-olds report having used marijuana, according to a National Institute on Drug Abuse study, and by 12th grade, 15.4 percent of teens have abused prescription drugs such as Vicodin or OxyContin.

The benefit of years

As Attar-Schwartz found in her study, grandparents have a unique ability to get their adolescent grandchildren to talk about their feelings and address some of the more pressing issues of their generation. Since time has given grandparents more experience than their adult children, they are able to naturally occupy different roles. Peggy Harrington understands the worries and concerns of her daughter-in-law, Brenna Harrington, because she lived through them herself while raising her own kids. She believes that her life experience gives her an outlook Brenna does not have yet—wisdom that Shawn herself has picked up on.

“When you’re raising your children, you’re so concerned with everything they do,” Peggy says. “You want to know where they are. You want to make sure their grades are good. You want to make sure their manners are good. But we have raised our own children, and we can see all those good qualities in our grandchildren, and know they’re going to be okay.”

Shawn respects her grandmother’s life experience. Because of this, Peggy can play a role Shawn doesn’t want her mother to play—her best friend.

“I can relate to my grandma a lot more,” Shawn says. “She does not talk down to me. She talks to me like I am her friend, more than like her granddaughter, like I’m more mature.”

Relationships and sex are topics Shawn says she could never imagine discussing with her mother and father. "My parents are very awkward about that kind of thing," she says. When Shawn did tell her parents about her friend's pregnancy, her mother erupted, something Brenna now regrets.

"I was judgmental, and thinking back on it, I probably overreacted," Brenna says. "But I want to raise very strong girls." When she learned how Peggy handled Shawn's news, Brenna sighed. "That's what I should have said."

Stories and sanctuary

Part of Shawn's faith in her grandmother's advice may be due to the many stories she can tell. A grandparent's role as family historian provides adolescents with needed stability, says Marsha Temlock, author of *Your Child's Divorce: What to Expect ... What You Can Do*.

"Grandparents are the repository of family lore, customs, language and stories," Temlock says. "They are the trunk of the tree. Children need a sense of place, and grandparents can provide that."

Grandparents also provide a break from what is going on at home. Now that she has a car, Shawn makes the 40-minute drive to her grandparents' house once a week. It's a relaxing place for her, and she often brings her friends along. Grandma's house can be neutral ground and therefore provide peace and security, Temlock says.

And as grandchildren move through their teens and begin to transition to adulthood, they still maintain a specific expectation of their grandparents' roles in their lives. "They want to be indulged," Temlock says. "They also want to feel safe with their grandparents. They want to feel as if they can tell them things and it would be held in confidence."

Bridge the divide

"Grandparents also take some of the burden off the parents and help make them less stressed, which in turn benefits the child," says Attar-Schwartz of Hebrew University.

Brenna Harrington is thrilled that Shawn is close to her paternal grandparents. She acknowledges that she and Shawn have reached a point in their mother-daughter relationship where they have trouble communicating—something Shawn readily agrees with: "With my grandma saying it, I listen more." Asked if she has a knee-jerk need to disagree with her mother, Shawn replied, "Yes, that's it exactly."

This tension between mother and daughter, while very normal, still distresses Brenna. But knowing Peggy is there to bridge the divide helps her sleep at night.

"I am constantly obsessing about what I can do and how I can talk to her," Brenna says. "I feel better knowing that Shawn is talking to Peggy. I don't care that she's not getting the messages, the information and support that I want her to get from me; I just want her to get it."

Shawn isn't the only one benefiting from this multigenerational relationship. "Peggy reminds me that this is normal behavior," Brenna says. "She assures me that Shawn is going to be fine."

Building the bond

This kind of close and beneficial grandparent-grandchild relationship does not happen overnight or without some effort.

Peggy and her husband, Sam, forged a close relationship with their grandchildren from the start. They were regular babysitters when the kids were younger. If there was a sports

game or recital, they were there. “I just said, ‘Hey, I get the grandchildren every other weekend,’ and before I knew it, my children held me to it,” Peggy says.

Peggy also benefits from a strong bond with her granddaughter. She is able to have the conversations with a teen that she craved, but could never have, with her own children when they were that age. She also can be an authority figure without the exhausting role of strict disciplinarian. Grandparents also seem to have a special ability to focus on accomplishments, instead of discipline and critiquing. Sam Harrington loves talking about—or more correctly bragging about—his four granddaughters, a fact likely not lost on them.

“My kids all laugh at me now, seeing how I am with the grandchildren,” says Peggy, who admits to having been a very strict mother.

If the statistics hold true, the importance of the grandparent-grandchild relationship is bound to increase over the coming years. Attar-Schwartz’s study points out that as the average lifespan increases, so will the likelihood of three- and four-generation families. And perhaps so will the number of grandparents dancing at their grandchildren’s weddings, where they, too, will be breathing a sigh of relief that the turbulent adolescent years are over.

Cynthia Ramnarace writes about families and health from Rockaway Beach, N.Y.

Copyright 1995–2009, AARP. All rights reserved. A Member of AARP Global Network

