

# CONNECTING WITH THE GRANDKIDS

You can 'Like' but you better not comment! Learning the rules to interacting with grandkids on social media can be a challenging—and often rewarding—lesson in making short but meaningful connections.

By Jimmy Magahern



**D**r. Lisa Strohman worries our youngest generation and our oldest generation are drifting apart, becoming more and more separated by technology.

In her practice as a clinical psychologist and founder of the Technology Wellness Center, a Scottsdale clinic that specializes in helping children and adolescents kick "technology overuse," Strohman often sees kids who can't find the time—or "bandwidth," as the most tech-obsessed put it—to call grandma or grandpa and actually talk on the phone.

"They don't like to call," says Strohman, a 40-something mom herself with two elementary school-aged children in the house who are adept at using every gizmo on their mobile devices *except* the phone app. "And some grandparents can

be intimidated by new technology. As a result, I think that we have the greatest generational gap, technologically, that we've ever had. The biggest challenge I see facing grandparents is, how do you learn how to communicate with your grandchildren on their terms?"

That can be especially challenging, Strohman notes, when the preferred method of communication for young people changes with each new social media phenomenon. Grandparents who finally learned how to text to keep up with their grandkids who belong to the millennial generation may now have to learn how to navigate Snapchat, Vine and Instagram to stay in touch with the young 'uns from Generation Z, the name given to the kids born after the millennials.

"The millennial generation were easier in the sense that they would use a lot of text messaging, which many grandparents have actually become pretty savvy with," she says. "The younger kids coming up—those in 5th or 6th grade, or junior high school—they kind of live on Skype or one of the other video platforms, and they'll be on it for seven hours a night, mostly with their peer groups. But that time excludes the grandparents, because that age group doesn't want to 'waste time' on talking with parents or grandparents, since the peer group becomes so central to them at that stage."

It's not surprising, then, that some grandparents can come to resent the little digital devices their grandkids become so glued to.

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"Grandparents, particularly those on their first grandkids, will enjoy a lot of face-to-face time with the kids when they're little and will become super-connected with them," Strohman observes. "And then when the kids go off to elementary school and start to use technology more, all of a sudden their grandparents become obsolete and unimportant. It's almost as if this castaway action occurs, and that can create an unspoken resentment between the grandparents and the technology. They can begin to feel very purposeless, like they no longer have a role in their grandchildren's lives because they've been replaced."

**"I feel like social media was invented for grandparents!"**

-Cleo Ness

Or...they can embrace the technology the grandkids use, and actually begin to enjoy staying connected through tweets, posts, pictures and videos.

"I feel like social media was invented for grandparents!" counters Sun City Grand resident Cleo Ness, 79, whose

seven grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren all live far away from her in Texas. "What I like is that they video everything. One of them might be having a birthday party, and I can't be there. But they'll video it and I can watch it here on my iPhone, just a few minutes later."

Ness says she uploads her own share of videos, some starring her dog, Lilly Pearl, dressed up in various costumes. In return, she sees almost daily videos from her grandkids. "I get to see them jumping on the trampoline or going fishing or whatever. It makes me feel like they're not so far away."

Roger Borland, 87, a retired clergyman and one of Ness' neighbors at The Colonnade retirement community, likes using the Hangouts app on his smartphone to do live video chatting

with his six grandkids, who are spread out around the country from California to Wisconsin to Massachusetts.

"I like the instantaneous connection," he says. "The kids aren't oriented toward talking on the telephone anymore like we were in my day. But they'll do the video calling—which is even better, because you can both see each other on the screen."

Borland admits it took him a little while to get up to speed on things like Hangout and Facebook Messenger, which most of his grandkids use to chat. But now he says he hears from his three sons and their kids more than he ever did back in the days when only the telephone connected family members.

"It's a really a good way of keeping in touch," he says. "It's like the kids



Cleo Ness

and grandkids are never further away than your pocket."

### Rules of engagement

Peggy Moore says she never been hesitant about jumping into social media.

"I was into it right from the start," says the Colonnade resident, who often helps out in the monthly iPhone and iPad classes led by Sun Health Senior Living manager Paula Sikes. "As soon as cellphones got texting capabilities, I couldn't wait to do that!"

Moore acknowledges that some of her peers in the retirement community feel intimidated by the new technologies. "They're scared of it," she says. "I remember one day a lady here was nervous about getting a new phone, and so me and another resident who had an iPhone did a FaceTime video call sitting right across from each other at lunch. And she was sold on it immediately. She went right out and got an iPhone and started FaceTiming with her family. Once you see how it's done and you try it, it's easy."

Learning the rules of communicating with the grandkids through social media can be another matter. Moore says as a grandma on Facebook, she's learned not to butt into comment threads between her grandkids and their friends—to stay in her lane, so to speak. "Oh yeah, they can put you out of that really fast!" she says, laughing.

Julie Treinen, who directs the kinship program at Arizona's Children Association in Tucson that facilitates grandparents caring for their grandchildren, says there are some steadfast rules for grandparents diving into social media relationships with their grandkids.

"On Facebook, you can't comment on stuff if you're grandma, you can only 'Like' stuff!" says Treinen, reciting the line virtually all grandparents hear from their teenaged granddaughter soon after starting an account. "If you have a comment, you have to put that in a private message. So there are relational rules to how you're allowed real open to teaching you!"

Moore says her grandkids will happily shout out specific photo usage rights whenever she snaps a photo of something potentially embarrassing,

"They'll say, 'No Facebook, Grandma! And you'd better listen!'"

Strohman says there's even a delicate psychology behind timing your "likes" on your grandchildren's Facebook or Twitter pages. "If a kid is anywhere from high school age to their 20s, and they post something and somebody doesn't 'like' it within the first five minutes, they get stressed," she says. "But if you're the only one who 'likes' it and nobody else clicks that button, that could impact their feelings, too."

Moore is enough of a power user that she figured out how to start an invitation-only family Facebook page, and recommends the practice to other grandparents. "That keeps us up on family things, and only our family can get into it," she says. "It's great for the things your grandkids don't want shared on their pages."

She and her husband learned to group message, too, which now becomes their center of entertainment whenever a big sports event comes on TV. "My husband will be watching a hockey game with our sons, one in Michigan and one in Boston, and they'll go back and forth, round and round in the messages, one joke after another," she says.

"It's made it a lot more fun than waiting on that Sunday afternoon phone call."

#### Going viral

If that "castaway" grandparent feeling replaced by technology had a face, it would probably belong to Oklahoma's Kenny Harmon, or "Sad Papaw," as he quickly became known on Twitter.

In a post by Harmon's granddaughter Kelsey effectively throwing shade on all her siblings, the Northeastern State University student tweeted a photo of her grandfather looking sadly at a home-cooked burger and a small plate Papaw tonight. He made 12 burgers for all six grandkids and I'm the only one who shoved. Love him," she closed, with a crying emoji.

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Peggy Moore



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The tweet went viral (2,000 retweets within the first 30 minutes), "Sad Papaw" became an Internet meme, and in the end Harmon won the attention of all his grandkids—not to mention thousands of their Gen-Z and millennial peers—by ironically becoming an accidental star on the little screens they'd come to prefer watching over him across a dinner table. His next barbecue was announced on Twitter—and hundreds of people showed up, along with his suddenly appreciative grandkids. The lesson? If you want to get on your grandkids' handwheels, you've got to become a bit of an internet sensation. "I don't expect grandparents to

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(Grandparents) have to learn how to communicate using social media. Because that's where their grandchildren are.”

-Dr. Lisa Strohman

immediately get on SnapChat or Instagram so that they remain relevant to their grandchildren's generation. Because, quite frankly, no kids want to see that!" says Strohman, with a laugh. "But they do have to learn how to communicate using social media. Because that's where their grandchildren are."

Tucson's Treinen says there are some hidden benefits to grandparents learning the new technology from their grandchildren, beyond just increasing communications.

grandparents very young and alive. They're constantly teaching them new stuff, and they enjoy it, it gives them a real sense of competency. And the grandparents are open to it. It's really nice to watch."

Treinen says those purposeful interactions between the generations in learning the new ways to stay connected can cement a stronger bond than that weekly check-in on the phone.

"If the grandparents' generation is not resistant to learning, and the younger generation is open to teaching, that gives such



Dr. Lisa Strohman

is, there's research that shows that if you're constantly learning complex things, you're staying off dementia," she says. "That's what I see in the inter-generational work that I do. I've got grandchildren that are keeping

a perfect opportunity to grow the relationship that the grandparents crave so much. While having the grandchildren stopping by and visiting may be what grandma wants, this provides constant contact.

"The grandchildren share everything

that's going on in their lives on their phones," she adds. "And grandma gets to 'Like!'"

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