

FAMILY

There is an assumption that becoming a grandparent is simple, that it brings automatic closeness, regular visits, and a clearly understood role. That families naturally gather, and everyone knows where they stand. In reality, the picture is far more varied and often more complicated.

In my work as a psychologist and ageing expert, and in conversations with friends and peers, I see a wide range of experiences. Some are joyful and deeply connected. Others are marked by distance, imbalance, or quiet grief. Most sit somewhere in between.

For Karen, 68, becoming a grandmother never unfolded as she had imagined. Following a difficult divorce many years ago, she lost regular contact with her children. When her daughter finally got back in touch, it was to say she had a child. Karen is now a grandmother, but the relationship remains fragile. Communication is limited to occasional emails, often practical in tone, sometimes including requests for financial help. There have been no visits, no time spent together, no opportunity to build a relationship or bond with her grandchild.

She finds herself wondering whether things might have been different had her marriage survived. It is not a question with an answer, but one that lingers. What she feels most is not anger but sadness, and a sense of something missed that cannot easily be repaired.

Others find themselves not excluded but edged to the side. Anna, 65, has two sets of grandchildren. A falling out with her daughter means she no longer sees three of her grandchildren at all, despite once being closely involved in their lives. With her son, contact exists, but is shaped by proximity. Her daughter-in-law's mother lives nearby and is part of the family's daily routine, present for school runs and informal visits. Anna, by contrast, travels over 150 miles to visit.

Anna makes the effort to visit every six to eight weeks, yet even when she is there, she feels like a guest in someone else's established rhythm. Time with the grandchildren is limited and often mediated by others. She describes it not as conflict, but as a quiet sidelining that is hard to challenge without creating tension.

Her husband experiences this differently and is less affected by the imbalance. Like many grandfathers, he tends to step into time with the grandchildren when it is offered, rather than shaping it himself.

For some, the issue is logistics. Lisa, 63, who I met on a weekend course, had expected to be an involved grandmother, but distance has made that difficult. Each visit requires an overnight stay, and the cost has become a barrier after redundancy.

She still visits when she can but far less often than she had hoped. What she feels is not rejection but a gradual narrowing of contact shaped by circumstances she cannot easily change.

At the other end of the spectrum



How grandparenting looks in Britain today

Differing expectations between parents and their children can lead to real tensions, writes **Dr Denise Taylor**

are those for whom grandparenting has become too much. Maggie, 76, whom I spoke to at a meet-up group, has seven grandchildren. With her youngest daughter, who has three children under five, she is expected to provide childcare three days a week.

The arrangement was easier when she was younger. Now it has taken over her week. Caring for three young children at her age is physically demanding and she feels increasingly worn down. Yet she finds it difficult to step back. There is an unspoken expectation and a fear of letting her daughter down. What began as support now feels like an obligation.

Her husband helps when he can, particularly with the more physical aspects of play, but is less likely to question the arrangement. The expectation has settled around them both, even if it is felt more acutely by her. He appears to find it less tiring, engaging in shorter bursts of physical play rather than the sustained care she provides.

For some grandparents, what becomes difficult is not the presence of grandchildren, but the expectations that grow around that role. In conversations with

grandparents over the past year, several described a gradual shift from occasional help to something more structured and assumed. Regular childcare becomes part of a weekly system, sometimes organised around work patterns, sometimes even set out in schedules. What begins as a choice can, over time, feel less like an offer and more like an obligation.

This can be particularly challenging in later life. Energy levels are not what they once were, and caring for young children, especially over long days or several days a week, can take a physical toll. Yet this is not always recognised by younger generations, for whom the demands of work and family life feel equally pressing.

There is also a question of agency. Many grandparents have spoken to me about wanting to help, but also wanting the freedom to decide when and how. To travel, to rest, to shape their own lives in this phase. When that freedom is assumed

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away, even unintentionally, it can lead to feelings of resentment, guilt, or quiet exhaustion.

In some cases, this extends to differences in parenting styles. Being asked to follow detailed routines, or feeling corrected for doing things "wrong", can make grandparents feel more like childcare providers than family members. These tensions are rarely openly discussed. Instead, they sit beneath the surface, shaping relationships in ways that are not always easy to name.

But not all experiences are difficult. Carol, 68, and her husband Ron, 73, made a deliberate decision to move closer to their grandchildren. They now help with school pick-ups several times a week and are a regular, welcome presence in family life. They have structured their time to allow for this, even buying a smaller second property nearby.

For both of them, grandparenting is a source of enjoyment and connection. Ron, who had not expected to be so involved day to day, has found his own role within it. He is less likely to organise but fully engaged when present, building easy routines and shared

activities with the children. He is the one who kicks a ball around the garden, suggests a jigsaw, or settles the children in front of a favourite programme, small consistencies that have quietly become their own.

But even where relationships are good, expectations can differ. Kate, in her late sixties, would like to see more of her grandchildren, now aged seven and nine. In practice, this has become difficult.

Their lives are full with school, clubs, and social activities taking up much of their time. Weekends are carefully managed, and her daughter prefers to keep that time within the immediate family. Kate understands this in principle, but has found it hard to accept. She became aware, indirectly, that her daughter finds the expectation of regular visits intrusive. It has left her unsure of her place, and hesitant to ask for more time.

And then there are those choosing something different altogether. Zena, in her mid-sixties, has taken the opportunity in later life to travel extensively. She is currently living abroad for part of the year and has embraced a more independent lifestyle.

Her daughter, who has young children, struggles with this, having assumed her mother would be more available for support. From Zena's perspective, this is a long-awaited phase of freedom. From her daughter's, it feels like a withdrawal from family responsibility. Neither is entirely wrong, but their expectations are not aligned.

Grandfathers often occupy a slightly different space. Some are deeply involved, particularly when encouraged or when patterns have been consciously created. Others remain more peripheral, stepping in when invited rather than initiating contact. In some cases, especially following divorce, that involvement is reduced further, not through lack of care, but through uncertainty about their role.

What emerges from all of these stories is that there is no longer a single model of grandparenting. For previous generations, the role was often more clearly defined. Families tended to live closer together, expectations were more consistent, and grandparents were assumed to be involved in practical ways. Now, a combination of longer lives, greater mobility, changing parenting styles, and different expectations about later life has altered that picture.

Some grandparents are deeply embedded in daily childcare. Others are occasional visitors. Some feel excluded. Some feel overwhelmed. Some are content with a more distant role, or are choosing to prioritise other aspects of their lives. What is often missing is open conversation about expectations, limits and what is realistically possible at this stage of life.

Many of the people I spoke to described holding back. Not wanting to appear demanding, ungrateful, or difficult. Not wanting to risk further distance by raising concerns. As a result, expectations remain unspoken, and misunderstandings can deepen.

Grandparenting, it seems, is no longer something that simply happens. It is something that has to be negotiated, invited, and at times, gently redefined.