



Lessons From Grandparenting

Intergenerational Partnerships in Early Childhood Programs

by Debbie LeeKeenan and Jamie Cho

We all know that raising children requires a network of caring adults, yet in the dominant culture of the United States, we are often missing this village of kinfolk to nurture and love our children. Care often relies on the labor of early childhood professionals. What if early childhood education emulated familial bonds and partnered closer with extended families to create lasting relationships that support children throughout their lifetimes? What lessons can we learn from the family village?



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Grandparenting

Debbie: They call us PawPaw (Chinese for grandmother) and Grandpa. We are the LeeKeenans, a mixed race, multi-ethnic, and multigenerational family. I am the Lee, my husband is the Keenan. Our adult children are biracial and our grandchildren are mixed race. We identify as Chinese, Asian, Irish, White, American, Brazilian, Indian, and more.

My husband and I (Grandpa and PawPaw) have been part of the village caring for our three granddaughters from babyhood on ... and they are now ages 20 (Tabatha), 8 (Maya) and 6 (Reya). I grew up with my grandma living with us and cooking a hot lunch each day when I came home from school. So it felt very natural that my husband and I would do the same for our grandchildren. We see our Seattle grandchildren almost daily. With our daughter and eldest granddaughter we lived together in a two family house in Cambridge, Massachusetts. When our daughter and granddaughter moved to Texas, we still connected with Tabatha who was 8 at the time via video call on a daily basis—drawing, playing games, doing dramatic play, or reading books.

During the pandemic when schools were shut down and we were sheltering in place, I took on the role of providing PawPaw's home school for our 1.5- and 3-year-old granddaughters in Seattle, Washington.



LeeKeenan family

More recently, we have set up an intergenerational book blog where we can discuss, share, and review books together.

From our experience, there is no doubt we have all reaped bundles of benefits. For the grandchildren, we have been another source of knowledge and friendship, mentoring and emotional support and a connection to our family heritage and history. For the parents, we have provided child care and support, which has led to deeper relationships between us. As seniors we benefit from the enhanced socialization, mental interaction, and an active lifestyle that comes with young children. We are blessed to witness the growth of our adult children as they navigate the journey of parenting, as well as the joy of our grandchildren greeting us each day with glee.

What values are transmitted by our interactions? Tabatha at age 11 wrote a book, *All about PawPaw*, highlighting my journey becoming an anti-bias teacher based on stories I had shared from my life. Now Tabatha, as a young adult, carries on those values. Maya, now age 8, joins Grandpa when he volunteers serving meals at the soup kitchen. Grandpa Chris has found that the granddaughters all love stories, stories about what he did when he was their age, and stories from books he has read. While he would rather read the book aloud, the kids want it retold in his own words. Storytelling is an authentic way to pass on values.

While grandparenting has been one of our greatest joys, it is not without challenges. There is stamina! Around young children, I am more tired at 72 than when I was 32. Nevertheless, Maya, my 8-year-old granddaughter, recently told me, “PawPaw you are not a typical grandma—you are like a teenager!” Some studies have demonstrated that grandparents can feel stress when taking on full responsibility for caregiving which has adverse effects on their

health, especially when they have limited economic and social support (Mendoza et al, 2019).

Other potential challenges in intergenerational relationships can be the melding of our roles as parent and grandparent. Who is in charge? Ideally the parents are, even when they may not be in the room. When we are caring for the children alone, and one of them asks, “Can’t we have another cookie, watch another video?” We say, “What would mom and dad say?”

Grandchildren

Jamie: As a second-generation Chinese American who grew up in the United States, my experience with my own grandparents was much less frequent than Debbie’s experiences with her grandchildren. Both my paternal and maternal grandparents lived in Taiwan. My father was the youngest in his family of seven siblings, and he and his eldest brother were the only ones to go abroad. However, my paternal grandparents never visited us in the United States, despite the financial means and time to do so. Thus, I only spent time with them when our nuclear family visited Taiwan which was limited. In my memory, I can only remember a few visits with them.



Three Cho children with their maternal grandparents in Taiwan



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My maternal grandparents came to visit us in the United States annually and they would stay with us for an extended period of time. It often was during the spring and summer months that they would visit. They would walk my sister and me to school in the mornings, and walk us home in the afternoons. My grandparents would cook special Chinese meals for us. On weekends and holidays we would take day trips or road trips. My sister and I loved when my grandparents would come visit. Like Debbie with her grandchildren, my grandparents, too, nurtured me. They told stories about Taiwan, knew a lot about everything, modeled what it meant to embrace their quirks, and gave me unconditional love.

Now, in our family, my three kids also have a long distance relationship with their grandparents. But despite the distance, they are very close. With Zoom and Google Meet, and snail mail, my kids regularly connect with their grandparents, their aunt, and their cousins, in between the months until they see them in person. At least twice a year we gather in one of the cities we live, or at a shared destination. As an observer of these relationships, I believe that for my children, their grandparents and extended family validate their identities, honor their individuality, and ground them in their ancestry. There is

nothing like a grandpa who tells silly stories, or a grandma who encourages your artistic expression, or an auntie who would love nothing more than to spend an hour crawling on the ground with you, that makes you feel completely loved.

Intergenerational Partnerships in Early Childhood

We do not think these feelings of being seen, heard, and valued within kinship networks are exclusive to biological families. What we have described is the essence of beloved community (King, 1957), that is about creating connections and relationships that are enduring, equity-centered, and rooted in unconditional care for one another. Indigenous scholars, Anthony and Chelsea Craig, center intergenerational leadership that disrupts hierarchy rooted in colonization in creating a school community that feels like home with teachers and school leaders as relatives (Paris, 2024). Similarly, the Native Family Learning Lodge in Seattle is a Black and Indigenous-led birth-to-three home-based program organized by parents who could not find what they wanted for their babies. It is a space offering an Indigenous-centered and community kinship modeled educational experience. Kinship care is an Indigenous



Photo credit: Jonah Kozlowski

Native Family Learning Lodge, Seattle, Washington

practice where children are raised by extended family and members of the community. This approach demonstrates the importance of maintaining connections to family, life-ways, language, and community. (LeeKeenan, Nimmo & McKinney, 2024).

The lessons learned from how we feel, and what we experience when we are part of extended kinship care, can and should be applied to educational spaces. Not only can school be a place of warmth, unconditional positive regard, trust, and belonging, it can also be a place where different perspectives are valued and conflict is viewed as generative. Parenting is culturally bound and caregiving norms shift from one generation to another. Our commitments to intergenerational partnerships are best illustrated by the way we approach disagreements that will inevitably arise, rather than trying to avoid conflict altogether. For example, consider the possible responses to an infant's cry: what do you do when an infant is crying? Do you let them cry it out? Pick them up and rock them? Carry them around with you in a swaddle carrier?

Below is a list of areas where cultural and generational conflicts often occur and can cause misunderstandings (York, 2016).

- Discipline and child guidance techniques
- Gender roles
- Age related expectations of children
- Sleep patterns and bedtime routines
- Diet and mealtime behavior
- Child's role and responsibility in the family
- Medical care
- Attachment and separation
- Families expectation of teachers and schools
- Children's play
- Children's learning styles

When moments like these happen, we need to pause and acknowledge there is a difference of opinion, a possible cultural or generational conflict, not that one is wrong and one is right. We need to find out more from the primary caregivers. You, as educators, can also share your thoughts.



Photo credit: Debbie LeeKeenan



Photo credit: Debbie LeeKeenan

Often you will defer to the families but sometimes everyone may decide it is fine to do it one way at school (or at grandma's house) and another way at home. It is good for the (grand)children to know there are different perspectives on how to do something, and that is okay. Another strategy is to look for compromise, common ground or a "third space." The third space is a place where people in conflict come to a mutually decided agreement that goes beyond their initial view points. The goal is to inform each other, build on each other's ideas, seek to understand each other and come up with a solution that works for everyone. In seeking a third space in conflicts we have the potential for teaching and learning on both sides of the relationship. (Derman-Sparks et al. 2015, 2023)

Today, we find the phrase, "it takes a village" is not just for the home village, but extends to the early childhood school program too (Goldberg, 2016). Many programs have staff of different ages and different ethnicities who bring with

them different experiences and different perspectives. There are programs that partner with senior centers on a regular basis (Takahama, 2019). This is enriching for all and yet could produce some disequilibrium. The benefits and challenges are similar to grandparents taking care of grandchildren. For those children who do not live with or near extended family, early childhood communities can be relatives who commit to nurturing and caring for their collective children. In creating this environment, we, as advocates of early childhood programs and families, must continue to challenge dehumanizing systems that fail to recognize care as a human right, and as a professional skill that should be honored and compensated.

Below are some tips for effective intergenerational partnerships that are relevant for the home and classroom, too.

- Expand your definition of family. A family is a circle of people who love and care for you.
- Appreciate the different perspectives and benefits to the child and to the adults with intergenerational caregiving.
- Acknowledge the challenges and differences in child rearing strategies that inevitably occur.
- Have set time and format for regular communication; it could be a text group, a google doc or face to face meeting when children are not present, to share, update, and problem-solve.
- Balance consistency between caregiving styles and having children become more flexible and resilient.
- Grandparent, adult, child relationships are successful when there is openness, trust, appreciation and boundaries.
- Invite elders to the classroom to share stories.
- Reflect on your own role as a relative to children in your care.

Each of us needs a network of folks to support us in nurturing children, who will cherish them for who they are and who they will become. In our field of early childhood education, it is more important than ever to resist the systems and policies that make education transactional rather than relational. In partnering with family in the broadest sense, we practice the art of social justice.

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Resources

- FILM: *Families Embracing Anti-Bias Values*
antibiasleadersece.com/families-embracing-anti-bias-values
- PawPaw's Home School
sandybabaee.wixsite.com/naeycaif/pawpawshomeschool
- Grandparent Book Blog
grandparentbookblog.blogspot.com
- My Life as Grandpa
blog.peps.org/2019/08/28/my-life-as-a-grandpa