

A can't-miss babysitting guide for grandparents

Grand Plans

BY ANDRE MAYER

ILLUSTRATION BY COURTNEY WOTHERSPOON

THE FIRST TWO DECADES of parenthood are both tough and rewarding. By doing everything from toilet training to hosting birthday parties to puzzling through math problems, you learn to be a drill sergeant, social convenor and crisis manager.

But once your kids grow up and move out, you might not have much use for those traits—until the fateful day your offspring ask you to look after *their* offspring. You might then worry your babysitting skills have slipped.

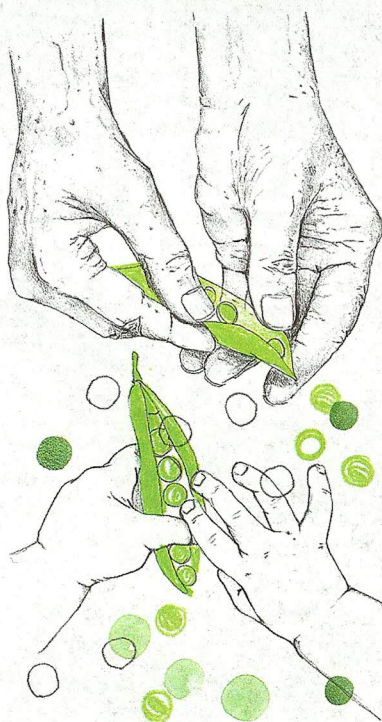
“Taking care of a child is not typically something one forgets how to

do, but [some particulars] may have changed,” says author and psychologist Sara Dimerman. “And each child is different.”

Here's the good news: you've still got it. You might just need to brush up on some techniques, whether you're watching a wee baby or a world-weary adolescent.

Respect routine

While your grandchildren aren't strangers, you may not live with them on a daily basis. You and the parents should go over their routines—such as appropriate times for naps, dinner and bed—as well as the



kids' idiosyncrasies, from food sensitivities to their favourite stuffed toys.

“Sometimes problems arise when grandparents assume they know better and do things their own way rather than following through with the parents' requests,” says Dimerman. “This can create conflict and may not always be in the child's best interests.”

Once the parents feel confident you won't scar their progeny, feel free to trust your instincts. You've got experience. You also have licence, as a grandparent, to bend the rules a bit if they don't work for you.

Keeping them amused

Given the ubiquity of smartphones and other video-playing devices, some grandparents may think children can't entertain themselves any other way. That's simply not true, says Charlotte Livingston of King City, Ont., a grandmother to three young boys.

With her 10-year-old grandson in particular, she says, “I feel that at home, there's a heck of a lot of screen time. I actually like to limit that.”

Rather than simply switching on the television or a tablet, Livingston keeps her grandsons in thrall with reading, crafts and outdoor activities, such as biking. She's also adopted the habit of bringing along board games, such as *Trouble*, whenever she's on babysitting duty.

The longer haul

If your grandkids are staying for a longer spell, it can be helpful to establish a daily routine, as though they were actually living with you. That might include stricter bedtimes and even some chores, says Patricia Adair of Maryfield, Sask., who has nine grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

Adair often gets them to pitch in around the house, whether it's picking peas in the garden or mowing the lawn. Asking the younger set to lend a hand and peel carrots for dinner helps them appreciate what goes into maintaining a household, she says, and it can open up opportunities to have casual yet meaningful discussions about family and school.

Back to reality

For many kids, a trip to their grandparents' house means a few more sweets, a few more stories and more freedom in general. Still, you should ensure your charges understand that the party ends when they return home, says Kathy Buckworth, author of *I Am So the Boss of You*.

Being at Grandma and Granddad's can be like a mini-vacation, she says, but after the fact, “it is normal to have a ‘re-entry’ period where the child is reintroduced to real life with Mom and Dad.”