
Caring for Infants and Toddlers

As a grandparent, you may feel out of practice in caring for a very young child. It may have been many years since your own children were young. We know more now about how the brain develops and how to keep children safe. The number of educational toys and products may seem overwhelming. What's a grandparent raising an infant or toddler to do?

The first step to caring for your young grandchildren is to relax. Even though we've learned more over the last few years about how very young children develop, children's basic needs haven't changed all that much. The basics that you gave your own children are still the most important things for your young grandchild: a warm, loving relationship; a safe, secure home; chances to try new things; consistent routines; and gentle, loving guidance. By providing a nurturing home for your grandchildren, you are giving them essential support that will help them grow into healthy, happy adults.

Basic Safety for Infants and Toddlers

One of your first concerns as a grandparent is keeping your young children safe. Infants and toddlers can't understand what activities are unsafe, so they need your careful supervision to prevent injuries. Here are some common childhood injuries, along with basic ways to keep your young grandchildren safe. With these safety precautions in place, your grandchildren will have the opportunity to begin exploring the world around them.

Falls

As soon as infants start rolling or crawling, they run the risk of falling. Place safety gates at the top and bottom of stairs and in doorways of risky areas. Make sure windows are locked and screens are securely latched in place. Don't leave infants alone on an adult bed or sofa, even for a moment. When changing diapers, keep one hand on the child the whole time they are on the changing table. Toddlers are going to fall down a lot as they learn to walk. Check your rooms at "toddler level" for hard objects, sharp corners, and uneven floors that could injure a falling toddler. Always supervise your infant or toddler carefully; children can fall very quickly.

Drowning

Young children can drown in only inches of water within seconds. Never leave your infant or toddler alone in the bathtub, even for a minute. Be cautious with bathtub chairs for infants. A child could slip through the chair and become trapped under water. Don't leave a bucket of water (such as a mop bucket) unattended around your toddler. They could fall head first into the bucket and drown.

Strangulation and Suffocation

Children are strangled on clothing and equipment every year. To reduce the risk of strangulation, avoid clothes with drawstrings around the neck. Don't attach pacifiers to infants' clothes with a ribbon or string. Make sure that the bars on cribs and play equipment are spaced

so that the child's head could not get trapped between them. Don't use old cribs—many of them are strangulation hazards. Keep pillows, blankets, crib bumpers, and soft toys out of cribs. Place infants on their back to sleep.

Choking

Children can choke on small objects very easily. Check toy labels carefully; many packages specify what ages the toy is safe for. Do not give infants and toddlers toys with small parts. Latex balloons are very unsafe for children. Young children also are at higher risk of choking while eating. Teach children safe eating habits by requiring them to sit at the table when they eat. Avoid serving foods that pose choking hazards to children under 3, or cut them into very small pieces that are not round. Foods that are choking hazards include hot dogs, raisins, nuts, popcorn, hard candy, and grapes.

Car Crashes

Car and truck crashes are one of the most common causes of injury and death for young children. You can help children be safe by placing them in approved child safety seats that are appropriate for their size every time they ride in the car. Children need to ride in a rear-facing seat until they are at least 2 years old, and it is safer to keep them rear-facing until they outgrow the rear-facing car seat. When children ride forward-facing, use a child safety seat with harness straps until they are at least 5 or 6 years old and be sure to use the top tether to install the seat tightly. When children are 5 or 6 and mature enough to sit correctly, they can transition into a belt-positioning booster until the adult seatbelt fits them well. For more information on child passenger safety, go to <https://www.safekids.org/car-seat>.

Electricity

Electrical outlets and cords can be dangerous to young children. Be sure to secure all outlets with plug covers to prevent children from putting objects into the outlet. Electrical cords should be out of sight to prevent toddlers from tripping on them or putting them in their mouths.

Brain Development and Your Grandchild

A newborn baby's brain is not like an adult's. When a baby is born, most of the brain cells—called *neurons*—have developed. But most of the pathways between neurons that control our thinking and actions are formed during the early years of life, based on experience. As babies interact with the world, their brain cells strengthen millions of connections in specific brain pathways. The brain keeps track of the experiences that happen regularly; those pathways become stronger. The pathways that are not used regularly are pruned away to make room for the most important ones.

As a grandparent, you play an important role in helping your grandchildren's brains develop. Promoting brain development doesn't require lots of time or expensive toys. What young children need most are positive experiences to help them learn about the world. Here are some easy ways you can help build your grandchildren's brains:

Make your home safe.

Make your home an interesting and safe place for them to explore, without confining them for long periods in a playpen. Check your home carefully for anything that might endanger your grandchildren. Keep electrical outlets covered. Remove breakable objects from children's reach. Lock up medicines and cleaning products.

Provide enriching experiences.

New experiences help the brain make connections. Remember that simple, everyday things are new to infants and toddlers. Pots and pans make interesting sounds, and a simple trip to the grocery store can be an exciting opportunity to experience new sights, sounds, and smells.

Read and sing with your grandchildren.

Start reading aloud when your grandchildren are infants. Hearing you read helps your grandchildren learn language, and snuggling together with a favorite book strengthens your relationship. Singing and dancing together are also great ways to have fun together while also building your grandchildren's talking and listening skills.

Repeat, repeat, repeat.

Young children learning language need to hear the same words and phrases over and over. Read your grandchildren's favorite books regularly, even if you both know them by heart. Talk with your grandchildren about things you see or do. Use their names when you speak to them. Remember that repeating helps build connections in the brain.

Relationships are Important

It may be hard to believe that young infants can form relationships, but it's true—babies begin developing attachments to adults as soon as they are born. Early attachments actually can affect your grandchildren's success later in life. Children who were securely attached to an adult as babies tend to get along better with others and often do better in school. Developing a secure, trusting relationship with your young grandchildren is important.

Remember that babies can form strong, secure attachments to more than one person. Your grandchildren's relationships with you are special, and you can't be replaced in their minds. Reassure your grandchildren's parents or other caregivers that babies can have close relationships with all of you, as long as you are loving and consistently respond to their needs. For more ideas on helping your grandchildren maintain a relationship with their parents, see *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: [Helping Grandchildren Stay in Contact with Parents](#)* (Extension publication C 1284-02).

There are several things you can do to help your grandchildren build a secure attachment.

Be responsive to their needs.

Pay attention to babies' cues. Respond when they coo, cry, or laugh. It's not true that responding to babies whenever they cry will spoil them. Babies younger than 6 months old cannot be spoiled; they cry because they need something from you. When you respond to

babies' cries, they learn to trust you to take care of them. This trust helps build a secure attachment.

Play together.

Spend time interacting with your young grandchildren one-on-one. Set aside some time each day to play, sing songs, and read together. Take walks and describe what you see. Use diapering, baths, and mealtimes to talk to them. Having fun with your grandchildren helps strengthen your relationship.



Be consistent.

Knowing what to expect in your home helps your grandchildren feel secure. If their lives were chaotic before they came to your home, it's especially important to set up predictable routines for meals, baths, and bedtime. For example, the bedtime routine might include putting on pajamas, having a bottle, rocking in the rocking chair, and reading a story. Stick to the routine. Try to do things in the same order every day.

Be patient.

Forming a trusting relationship takes time. Your grandchildren might have trouble adjusting to living with you at first. But your patience, understanding and love will help them form a secure, loving relationship with you.

Trouble Saying Goodbye

When your grandchildren reach about 12 to 18 months old, they may be scared of strangers or may get upset when you leave. They may cry, cling to you, or run to be picked up when you return. This actually is a good sign that they feel secure around you and depend on you.

Keep your first trips away from your grandchildren short. If possible, leave them with someone they know. Give them plenty of time to adjust before leaving, especially if they are in a new place. Spend some time playing with them, and then say goodbye and reassure them that you will be back soon.

Never sneak out without saying goodbye—your grandchildren will only be more upset when they discover you're gone. But don't keep coming back to check on them; this only makes the separation harder. Be patient. As your grandchildren get older, they will learn how to handle separating from you more easily.

Guiding Toddlers with Love

Guiding children's behavior is one of the biggest challenges of grandparenting. When children begin crawling and walking, they begin to test limits. Toddlers are naturally curious. They explore the world by touching everything around them, and they like to put things in their mouths. They also try out their new skills by running, climbing, and jumping.

Safety is your first concern. Everything is a challenge to toddlers. They are not always aware of danger, so they need your guidance to keep them safe. The best strategy is to prevent problems before they happen. Supervise toddlers closely at all times. Remove unsafe objects from their reach. Close and lock doors to rooms where they shouldn't play. Find interesting toys and activities that keep their attention. Spend time playing with them. Set up a regular schedule for eating and sleeping.

When toddlers misbehave, correct them gently and redirect them to another activity. Keep rules short and simple, and try to use positive statements. If toddlers are throwing blocks, you might tell them, "Keep the blocks on the floor," or "Let's build a tower with the blocks." If toddlers are playing with something they shouldn't, redirect them by taking them to another room or giving them an interesting toy to play with. Be consistent—redirect toddlers every time they misbehave.

Give toddlers simple choices. Let them pick between two shirts, or decide whether to have broccoli or green beans for dinner one night. Letting them choose gives them some control and makes them feel important. Keep choices simple. Two or three options are enough for most toddlers; too many choices will confuse them. Make sure the choices are equally acceptable to you. Don't give them a choice if you won't allow them to actually choose it. If it's bedtime, don't ask toddlers whether they want to go to bed or keep playing. Tell them it's time to get ready for bed, but let them choose whether to read a story or brush their teeth first.

Try not to overwhelm toddlers with too many rules. Toddlers have very short memory and won't remember a large number of rules. You'll end up frustrated trying to enforce them. Keep in mind that toddlers learn through repetition. You may have to repeatedly redirect persistent toddlers, or remind them over and over to keep the truck on the floor. Guiding toddlers takes

time and patience. Over time, your toddlers will learn to follow the simple rules you set. And as children get older, they can help decide some rules and consequences for breaking them.

In Summary

Raising infants and toddlers can be challenging, but it's also rewarding. Keep them busy with fun and exciting new opportunities for learning. Protect them from dangerous situations. Provide consistent routines, loving guidance, and a nurturing home. Be attentive to their needs and spend plenty of time playing together. Your support will help your grandchildren grow into healthy, happy adults.

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