

## Meaningful Differences: How GRANDS Change Lives

### Ruth Nathan

Last week while at the park with my grandson we met several other grandmothers, one grandfather, and a grandparent couple. We all had one thing in common: we were taking care of our grandchildren because our own children were at work. Some of us spoke of offering our services, the rest of us spoke of having little choice because the cost of preschool has skyrocketed. Even small, non-accredited preschools can cost hundreds of dollars a week. Because preschool is not an option for every child yet (it is on our president-elect's radar), taking care of our grandchildren has become a specific type of kinship care, albeit one with a huge responsibility.

"After age three," say developmental experts Betty Hart and Todd Risley (*Meaningful Differences*, 1995), "the unique circumstances for learning are gone" (page 182). By "unique" these scientists mean that during the early years of a child's life much is learned through interaction, that is through the words and actions of their care givers. Through our body language, deeds, and what we say, for we are caregivers after all, children learn *what the world means*, and so grow cognitively; they learn *who they are*, and so grow socially, and they learn *what is valued*, and so grow emotionally, as well. What we do as caregivers matters every moment of the day.

As it happens, brain researchers, like Martha Farah from the University of Pennsylvania,<sup>1</sup> often point to the Hart and Risley study as they talk about the effects of language interaction on children's brains. In addition to other factors, such as malnutrition, stress, illiteracy, and toxic environments, children's brains are affected by a lack of enough language interaction, which in turn contributes to differential prefrontal cortex activity in the brain. The prefrontal area affects the ability to plan, remember details and pay attention in school. While these differences are certainly reversible, it takes a good deal of intensive intervention, says another child development expert, Susan Neuman.<sup>2</sup>

In the remainder of this column, I want to explore ways in which grandparents help their grandchildren grow cognitively, socially, and emotionally. We'll use the language of Hart and Risley to do so.

We ask, *What specifically can we do to promote our grandchildren's development?*

**What the world means.** For young children, what the world means comes in the form of questions, doesn't it? Where do stars come from? How do carrots grow? Why will I go to school? Are you really my mommy's mommy? And slowly we

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Farah is the director of the Center for Cognitive Neuroscience at the University of Pennsylvania.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Neuman is an education professor at the University of Michigan and is author of several books on child development, with an emphasis on literacy.

answer to the best of our ability and at other times through good books we have on hand. To both answer questions and just as importantly to encourage question-asking, we take our grandchildren on small outings as often as we can.

Nearby parks offer opportunities to explore balance, the relationship between sand and water, the effects of erosion by water, how hand and body co-ordination affects the scooter-truck's movement down the sidewalk trail, how pushing affects motion and how pulling does, too. A trip to a local museum gets the mind wandering to far away places. Where do these animals come from? Are they real? Alive? How come these rocks are lined up just so, and why do some sparkle? Watch the ants build their nest, leaf by leaf. Aren't they colorful? The leaves, I mean. What's over there? A trip to a creek in the neighborhood means lots of fun getting wet. It means sticks poke into mud to uncover beetle bugs rolled up. It means leaves float and rocks sink. It means that being close to nature has a certain sound, a certain smell, a certain quiet. A trip to the grocery store leads to talk about a healthy lunch or ingredients needed to bake a pie. One to the library brings a hush and then a rush to the kiddie corner to hear a good story on laps. There you'll look for books, too, that will help your grandchild develop concepts, just as your small trips do. With *Jack and Jill's Treehouse* (Pamela Edwards), your grandchildren will learn how a tree house is built. With *Gentle Giant Octopus* (Karen Wallace) they'll learn the ways of the beast. Your local librarian will have great book-lists, too, such as Valerie V. Lewis and Walter Mayes' *Valerie and Walter's Best Books for Children*; Anita Silvey's *The Essential Guide to Children's Books and Their Creators*; and *100 Best Books for Children* by Anita Silvey.

**Who they are.** Our grandchildren are big brothers or sisters, friends to some, and playmates to many. They are sons and daughters, grandchildren, nieces and nephews, students in preschool, and partners in adventure. They are explorers and pirates when they want to be, and they are scared and silly and happy when they want to be, too. When we agree to play pirate, we agree to their invention and we aide their sense of verisimilitude when we reply, "Okay, mate, as you please." When we put them on our laps and tell them stories about when we grew up, they learn the adventure of a life lived. When we rush if they fall, they learn that they matter deeply to us. When we offer a healthy snack, they learn that they are what they eat and that energy and strong muscles comes from healthy choices.

Good stories are useful here, too. If we choose *The Moon Walker*, by Paul Showers, our grandkids feel what's it like to be an older brother or sister. *Some Things are Scary* by Florence Heide, assures them they aren't alone when it comes to feeling scared to death by little things—even a too-tight hug by a strange aunt from Alaska. *Sophie Gets Angry—Really, Really, Angry...* by Molly Bang is a sure winner, too.

**What is valued.** Every time you do work with your grandchildren, you're helping them see what you value. Baking cookies together for a holiday beats buying them. Making a bed together is more fun than making it alone. Being kind to a spider crawling on your windowsill shows them you value the balance in nature: that to

every living thing there is a season and a reason. Planting small plants in a small pot and taking care of those plants teaches stewardship by deed, not word.

Below I've listed some of my favorite reference books that I have on my kitchen shelf and some terrific games to play as a whole GRAND family.

### **Some GRAND Books for You and Games for your Grandkids**

There are a few books on my bookshelf that I refer to often for ideas. Here are a few you can order from our Grand website:

*Reading Magic: While Reading Aloud to Our Children Will Change Their Lives Forever*, by Mem Fox.

*Sticky Trees* by the [www.sticky.com](http://www.sticky.com) group is one of a series of books that each teaches in a fabulously engaging and sticky way (you won't forget the names of trees, constellations, etc.) the beauty and wonder of nature. Easy for you and your grandchild.

*Chimealong* by the Woodstock Percussion, Inc. is an instrument and songbook in one. It sets up like an easel so one of you can play and the other can sing along. Available from [www.chimes.com](http://www.chimes.com)

*Easy Piano Tunes* by Anthony Marks, from Usborne, is a terrific buy if you play the piano, even a little bit. It's filled with tunes you know (*Oh Susanne, The Toreador's Song*) and loaded with activities and suggestions for other play-along instruments.

*Valerie and Walter's Best Books for Children* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition) by Valerie Lewis and Walter Mayes, published by HarperCollins. A really handy reference!

*Helping Your Preschool Child* by the U.S. Department of Education. This handy booklet is filled with activities for children from infancy through age 5. The book is in the public domain and can be ordered online at [www.ed.gov/pubs/edpubs.html](http://www.ed.gov/pubs/edpubs.html)

*Ready, Set, Grow!: A Kid's Guide to Gardening* by Rebecca Spohn, a Good Year Book, not only shows you how to plant all sorts of things, but is filled with fun facts, puzzles and projects, jokes, recipes, crafts, and a green-themed reading list.

### **Great Games to Play with Grandkids**

*Zimbos!Elephantastic Pyramids* (3+) from blue/range™ has you and your grandchild build pyramids from wooden elephants, which supports their learning of number order and balance.

*Pengolo: The Fun South Pole Eggspedition!* (2-4) from blue/range™ strengthens memory and teaches color concepts and number order, as well.

*Clay Play* (3+), from Melissa and Doug's Classic Wooden Toys, is the best set of rollers, hammers, and carving tools I've ever used with play dough-type material.

Animal Bingo from eeBoo™ Corporation (18months+), teaches taking turns, the skill of matching, and animal names. Perfect for the whole family.

*Zingo!: Bingo with Zing*, from Thinkfun/Everybody Plays™ (4-8), is like Bingo but with categories such as parts of the body, animals, foods, and so on.

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