



Family

The four-generation family

Many grandparents are torn between wanting to spend time with grandchildren and needing to care for their own parents

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On December 12, 2007, James and Nancy Wilcox of Lyman, Maine, welcomed their first grandchild, Connor, into the world. A month later, they welcomed James's parents into their home. "I left my job to take care of them," Nancy says. "We converted our dining room into a new bedroom."

Unusual just a few decades ago, the four-generation family has become a 21st-century social phenomenon. Today many grandparents are at the center of their families, not always an enviable position. They are eager to focus their time, attention, and resources on their grandchildren but at the same time they must assume new responsibilities for their aging parents, sometimes as primary caretakers.

"This is a fairly new situation which will come to be a major part of what it means to be a grandparent," says Allan Zullo, coauthor of *The Boomer's Guide to Grandparenting* (Andrews McMeel). "People have had to make some big adjustments about what they thought life as a grandmother or grandfather was going to be like."

Striving for Balance

Dr. Arthur Kornhaber, founder and president of the Foundation for Grandparenting, agrees. "We have got more great-grandparents than ever before," he says, "and with increasing longevity, folks are having to find a balance between helping the older and younger generations."

For Nancy Wilcox, 59, that has meant quitting her job to provide round-the-clock care for her 92-year-old father-in-law, who suffers from early to mid-stage Alzheimer's and has had surgery to treat rectal cancer, and her 91-year-old mother-in-law, who suffers from macular degeneration, an eye condition. "This is what the Lord would have us do," Wilcox says.

Caring for her in-laws has become a full-time job, but Wilcox says she still has plenty of contact with her son, daughter-in-law, and infant grandson, who live only a few miles away. "I'm ready to do whatever they need me to do," she says.

In fact, Wilcox believes that moving her in-laws into her home has brought all four generations of her family closer together. "It's made it much easier for the rest of the family to see Mom and Dad," she explains. "And it's made it easier on us — we used to drive down to their place to do their laundry and take them grocery shopping, banking, or whatever."

Enforced Separation

But for many other "sandwich" grandparents, creating an intergenerational home isn't an option. "One of the biggest problems is that nowadays people are spread out all over the country," Zullo says. "Your parents might be in Florida, you're based in Chicago, and your children and grandchildren are everywhere else."

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Welcome to Bernie Monegain's world.

Monegain, a 61-year-old editor and writer, lives in Brunswick, Maine, a few blocks away from her 91-year-old mother's apartment, but 1,000 miles away from her twin granddaughters, Megan and Nicole, who live in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Monegain would like to relocate to be closer to the girls, but she says she needs to stay close to her mother. In May, her mother had to be hospitalized after a fall. Monegain took charge of her recovery, even as she continued to work. "My daughter, Kristie, once asked my mom if she'd ever want to move down to Charlotte, and my mother just laughed," Monegain says. "For me, it's off the table."

That doesn't mean Monegain is cut off from her grandchildren's lives. Her work schedule allows her to travel to Charlotte three or four times a year, and she is on the phone with her daughter every night, frequently chatting with her granddaughters as well. "It would be more fun to be around them more frequently," Monegain says, "but Kristie doesn't really need me."

Monegain's choices are typical of today's grandparents, Zullo believes. "Grandparents find themselves prioritizing," he says. "They have to take care of their own parents, and other things have to give a little. Their adult children understand that."

Bringing Generations Together

To make the best of things, grandparents often try to involve grandchildren in the care of their great-grandparents. "You can have multigenerational time together," Zullo says. "It's an immense boost to the great-grandparents, and a valuable experience for older grandchildren. Let's face it — the great-grandparents have so much to offer as historians, as the bearers of cultural and religious beliefs, as a link to a century ago."

Kornhaber warns, however, that "sandwich" grandparents should expect to experience some stress as they are forced to allocate their finite resources of money and time between different generations. He expects that more multigenerational families will begin sharing their living spaces, and their incomes. That might mean that retirement will become less about golf, social activism or exotic vacations, and more about maintaining doctor's appointments, balancing checkbooks, and babysitting.

"But if you rank family highly on your list of priorities," Zullo says, "it's what you've got to do."

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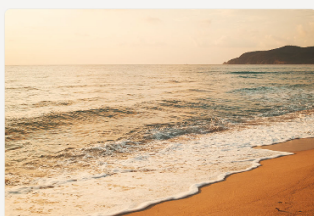
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