

# Digital grandparenting

## What do grandparents need to know to help young people stay safer online?



Many of the more than 14 million grandparents in the UK are actively involved in their grandchildren's lives. Whether they're a now-and-again babysitter, a regular carer or even if they live many miles away, what role can they play in keeping their beloved grandchildren safer in their digital world?

Facebook, smartphones and tablets aren't just for the young. Lots of grandparents are using the internet and other digital technologies to support their hobbies, build friendships and stay in touch with their families.

In a survey conducted by Vodafone in 2011, a tenth of the UK-based grandparents interviewed said they use technology every day to make contact with their grandchildren and more than a quarter (29%) revealed that they might feel isolated from their family if they didn't have access to the internet. From text messages and email to webcams and sharing photos on social networking sites, it's all helping to bring grandparents and grandchildren closer.

For the millions of grandparents who help look after their grandchildren,

there are other reasons why technology simply cannot be ignored. Whether they're in charge for a few hours, while mum and dad are out for the evening, a weekend here and there or every day while the child's parents are at work, it's important that grandparents understand the kind of gadgets and websites that young people enjoy so that they can support them and help them stay safer when they're in their care. And with the rise of smartphones like the iPhone and BlackBerry giving young people a mini-computer in their pocket 24/7, it's even more important to know what's going on.

Even the most tech-savvy grandparents might have concerns about what their grandchildren are doing on the internet, mobiles and other devices and, when it comes to the times that they're

**Did you know?**

The childcare provided by grandparents in the UK has been valued at **£3.9 billion**

(Source: Grandparents Plus)



under the grandparents' roof, it can be particularly tricky knowing what rules are already in place and how to help if something goes wrong.

"It's normal to worry about your grandchildren and the digital world," says Geraldine Bedell, editor of Gransnet, the social networking site for grandparents. "For one thing, young people might think they are better with technology than we are – it's one of the few areas where our wisdom is not in demand. For another, most grandparents want to be the fun people in the family, not the boring old heavy-handed makers of rules."

Grandparents' digital concerns often mirror those of their own children. Of the grandparents who spoke to Vodafone, around a quarter are worried that their

grandson or granddaughter could be meeting strangers online (25%) or accessing inappropriate content on the internet (24%). Other concerns might include young people giving away too much personal information online, being bullied and spending too much time in front of a screen.

For the great majority of kids for the vast majority of the time, the digital world will be a source of harmless fun, creativity and learning, so it's important to stay upbeat and positive about it. At the same time, grandparents can play an incredibly important role – as an extra pair of eyes and ears, a guide and a confidant. ■

**If you'd like to pass this article on to your child's grandparents, simply go to [www.vodafone.com/parents](http://www.vodafone.com/parents) to save it as a PDF that you can email or print.**

## 'Grandparents' checklist

Here are a few tips to help you get more involved in your grandchildren's digital lives...

- ✓ **TAKE** an interest in how your grandchildren use digital technologies – talk to them about their favourite websites, hobbies and games and who their online friends are
- ✓ **DO** fun stuff together, like playing games on their Wii or watching TV programmes on BBC iPlayer, and ask them to show you the websites they like – they'll no doubt enjoy sharing their tech know-how with you
- ✓ **TALK** to them regularly about their experiences in the digital world (both good and bad), so that they can build their confidence and know they can turn to you if something upsets or troubles them
- ✓ **ENCOURAGE** them to share any worries or difficult experiences with an adult they trust, such as a parent, teacher or you – some children find it easier to talk to a grandparent than other adults so they'll appreciate your offer of support
- ✓ **FIND OUT** from their parents what technology rules they have in place at home (e.g. how much time they are allowed to spend on the internet or their games console) so that you can also stick to them when your grandchildren are with you – your son or daughter might not have even thought about such rules (in which case, giving them a copy of this magazine might be a good way to get the conversation started) or they might just have forgotten to tell you about them
- ✓ **PUT** passwords or PINS on your own computer, mobile and other devices if you think your grandchildren might use them when they come to visit. Make sure your grandchildren don't know your passwords or PINs (e.g. your Wi-Fi password or mobile PIN) as they might be tempted to break the rules
- ✓ **MAKE** the most of tools like Parental Controls on computers, mobiles and games consoles and safety options on Google and other search engines for when they are at your house – take a look at our 'How to' guides for more information
- ✓ **TAKE** the things you might already be teaching your grandchildren in the real world and apply them to the digital world – like the importance of being kind and considering other people's feelings
- ✓ **REMEMBER**, even very young children use technology so it's never too early to encourage them to use it safely and responsibly... it's better to get them into good habits as quickly as possible
- ✓ **DON'T** wait until something goes wrong – help them develop the skills they need to take care of themselves (just as you would if you were teaching them to cross the road by themselves)
- ✓ **IF** you discover something that worries you, it might be difficult to know what to do but it's better to take steps to find out more rather than ignore it. You could start by talking to your grandchild and agreeing with them what to do next, such as talking to their parents. If you're still worried, you can email [The Parent Zone](mailto:help@theparentzone.co.uk) for advice at [help@theparentzone.co.uk](mailto:help@theparentzone.co.uk)
- ✓ **HAVE** a good look through the rest of this magazine – it contains lots of important information but we recommend you start with our *Spotlight on Age* (page 6) and *Spotlight on Digital Spaces* (page 10) articles

**EXPERT VIEW**  
 Geraldine Bedell


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[www.gransnet.com](http://www.gransnet.com)



**“S**o, what do they talk about? Knitting?” This is one of the most common responses when I tell people I edit Gransnet, the leading social networking site for grandparents.

Despite all the evidence to the contrary – despite the fact that most people know at least one hale and hearty grandparent – the image of grans is still of little old grey-haired ladies quietly occupying themselves with harmless handicrafts.

“Are there enough of them online?” is the other question I regularly get asked. In fact, over-65s are the fastest-growing age group on the internet and they spend more time logged on than anyone else. And half of all grandparents are younger than 65 anyway (10% of them are under 50).

# Think technology baffles grandparents? Think again.

Geraldine Bedell of **Gransnet** reveals how online forums are liberating and empowering grandparents all over the UK.

Far from being parked in the corner, many grandparents are busier than ever – working, volunteering and looking after their elderly relatives as well as their grandchildren – and generally being what one gransnetter calls “the jam in the sandwich”.

So the stereotypes are out of date (in both directions, in fact, because knitting is now highly fashionable among artistic young people).

Given that Skype, Facebook and photo sharing have opened up new ways to keep in touch with your family, it’s not surprising that grandparents have been tempted to embrace technology. And like everyone else, once they’ve dipped a toe in the water, they tend to be seduced by the wealth of experiences available.

Like other thoughtful adults, though, grandparents worry about aspects of their grandchildren’s use of digital technologies. Are they spending too much time online? What are they seeing? Do their parents look up from their own laptop or mobile often enough to notice that they’re playing violent computer games? What are their own responsibilities here, as grandparents?

So there are plenty of incentives to find out more, not only so they can engage in conversations about being safe online with some authority, but also to discover what else we can get out of the various devices on which we are increasingly dependent.

**“You know that no-one will judge you online.”**

If we don’t talk about knitting (mainly), what do we talk about on the Web? Quite a lot of the time, things you’re not supposed to discuss in polite company: politics, religion, sex, bowels, mammograms, difficulties in our relationships. There is stuff you can say anonymously on a forum that you could never mention anywhere else.

“All the things we’ve bottled up for years now have a safe outlet,” comments one of our users. “You know that no-one will judge you. Gransnet is the only place I have ever been able to express my true feelings about my mother.”

Such confidences tend to create an atmosphere of support and loyalty because once you’ve been entrusted with someone’s secrets, hopes and disappointments, you’re bound to feel concerned for them.

The most surprising aspect of Gransnet to me, after a year of existence, is the complexity of our users. Of course *I’m* complex, but a lot of the time we don’t see other people as having the same hidden depths. And perhaps this is particularly true of anyone over 50.

There is a resistance to thinking about the middle aged and old as multifaceted, not least because of persistent ageism. There was recently a discussion about loneliness on the site, and a number of the funniest, most lively gransnetters admitted to being lonely some of the time. You just wouldn’t have known.

The ways in which we define and pigeonhole people in the real world don’t apply online and, for some gransnetters, that is a real liberation. If they don’t want to tell the rest of us – or don’t want

to tell us until we’ve got to know how forceful and interesting they are – that they walk with a stick, they don’t have to.

Not only are gransnetters the sum of all our (now quite long-lived) parts, but we’re also a pretty diverse bunch – bonded by our love for our grandchildren, but beyond that, living all over the country, at different stages of life and with a lot of different attitudes. So we’re not easy to categorise.

Our members are pretty diverse politically, as in everything else, but there are certain causes that broadly unite us. It is a truism that women become invisible as they age – one of the common complaints on Gransnet is that older people find it hard to make their voices heard, particularly to politicians and the media – but thousands of us complaining on the internet is a bit more difficult to ignore.

One of the most persistent debates on our forums has been about ageism in hospital and the lack of dignity with which older patients are treated. We managed to get both the Minister of State for Care Services, Paul Burstow and the Shadow Minister for Care and Older People, Liz Kendall in to address these concerns directly to gransnetters in live Web chats.

**“Gransnet is the best Help button ever.”**

So, digital grandparenting has opened up a much broader range of interests for many of our members, who are, generally speaking, enjoying a phase of life that has never existed before: post-children but pre-old age and in a relatively long period of health and activity.

We hear a good deal about the ageing population, but what we’re really seeing is an extended middle age, when it’s perfectly possible to be a grandparent yet to be more connected to the rest of the world than you’ve ever been before.

From a starting point of wanting to connect with their grandchildren and follow what they’re up to, grandparents are discovering a whole range of interests online. All of human life is on the internet and a fair bit of it is on Gransnet.

“I love this forum. Where else can you get advice about dentures?!” one member posted recently. “Gransnet is the best Help button ever,” commented another. “Someone always seems to have the answer.”

Including, I am glad to say, about knitting. ■