

the stickyfaith guide for your family

Dr. Kara E. Powell

Author of *Sticky Faith*

OVER
100

Practical and Tested
Ideas to Build
Lasting
Faith in Kids





Grandparents and Senior Adults

The Magic of Intergenerational Interaction

Every kid needs a Ruth.

Every family needs a Ruth.

Every church needs a Ruth.

Even though I spent only a few minutes with Ruth, she permanently colored my picture of senior adults' impact in faith-pursuing families.

Ruth wore thick glasses and appeared to be in her late eighties. After hearing me present our research about Sticky Faith families at an evening church seminar, she approached me as I was putting away my laptop, to share her own strategy for helping students stay connected with God.

Ruth explained, "At the start of every fall, I ask our church for a list of the high school seniors who have just graduated. I get those students' names and addresses, and I write them all letters to let them know I'm thinking of them and praying for them. I tell them they don't have to write me back, and most don't. But when they come home at Thanksgiving or Christmas, they thank me for writing them."

As I drove away from the host church, I couldn't stop thinking about Ruth. Her willingness to put pen to paper to write each student one letter at the start of every fall was inspiring.

The next day, I felt prompted to share about Ruth as I was teaching our Sticky Faith research in the same city but to a different audience. Or as I was about to find out, to a mostly different audience.

The Sticky Faith Guide for Your Family

After I described Ruth and her amazing commitment to write one letter at the start of every fall to each high school graduate, an audience member raised his hand. I called on him, and he stood to explain, “I was here last night and saw Ruth talking to you. I know Ruth. We’re part of the same church. She doesn’t write those high school graduates once at the start of every fall. She writes them *every week*.”

Maybe you’re thinking what I and many audience members said aloud that day: *Wow*.

I had no grandparents growing up, but I've always had a special love for older people. When a woman in her late eighties needed a ride home from church each week, I started giving her a ride. This wonderful woman never had any kids or grandkids of her own, so she ended up pretty much adopting ours. We started visiting her at her house, and she ended up teaching my daughter how to sew and make her own doll clothes. When she died at age 107, it was a huge loss for our entire family.

—Monique

Ruth reminds us that there’s a group of people with untapped potential to don a jersey and join your family’s Sticky Faith team.

Senior adults.

Grandparents. Some are biological grandparents, meaning they are related to your kids. Others are adopted, or “functional,” grandparents, meaning they are not genetically related to your family but play the same role and relate to your kids like grandparents.¹

A grandmother herself, Ruth wasn’t satisfied with merely nurturing her own family tree. She branched out to encourage other young people. Ruth had prayed that God would send caring adults into her grandkids’ lives. She decided that she

would be an answer to those very same prayers of other grandparents.

If you’re a grandparent, I hope these findings and ideas help you pour faith into your own grandchildren. I pray that the story of Ruth inspires you to channel your faith toward other children and teenagers as well.

If you’re a parent who can recruit your own parents and in-laws to be part of your family’s team, you might want to share some of this chapter’s suggestions with them. If you’re a parent without the support of extended family, odds are good there’s a Ruth in your neighborhood or congregation who would be honored to help you encircle your kids with the love and support they need.

Sticky Findings

1 Grandparents Are More Involved Than Ever

The data supports what you may have noticed as you've looked at who is picking up kids after school: grandparents are more engaged than in previous generations.

According to gerontologist Dr. Vern Bengtson from the University of Southern California, the following factors are contributing to this increase in grandparents' engagement.

- Senior adults' health is improving, and their life expectancy is increasing.
- As more and more families have two parents who work outside of the home, grandparents are providing more after-school care.
- Grandparents have new ways to connect with their grandchildren through technology like Skype, Facebook, and text messaging.

As a result of these and other cultural factors, Bengtson and his team surmise that “Gen Xers and Millennials will have greater involvement with their grandparents—and, for some, their great-grandparents—than any previous generation of grandchildren in American history.”²

2 Involvement = Influence

The question grandparents ask our team most frequently is, My kids are part of the 40–50 percent who have drifted from the faith. Can I still have an influence on my grandkids?

Research says yes!

When it comes to religious influence on grandchildren, grandparents tend to choose one of four paths:

1. Grandparents can reinforce the parents' religious influence.
2. Grandparents can substitute for the parents' influence.

3. Grandparents can subvert the parents' influence.
4. Grandparents can ignore religion.³

Especially in the first three cases, grandparents have a significant influence on their grandkids' faith, and not just when grandparents align with parents' faith (as in the first path). Even when researchers statistically control for parents' faith influence, grandparents have a separate and independent impact on grandkids' faith.⁴

The data doesn't tell *why* grandparents have such influence. It might be they often have more time and focus to invest in kids' faith development than do busy and preoccupied parents. Or perhaps grandparents are simply more immune to conflict with teenagers than parents are.

Whatever the reason, it's good news if the senior adults in your kids' lives are passionate about their relationship with Christ. It's not-so-good news to those of you whose children are around senior adults who may (even unintentionally) be undermining your Sticky Faith plans.

What if my child's grandparents influence them in ways I wish they didn't?

Extra electronics and extra sugar. In my opinion, a few ounces of spoiling are a grandparent's role, if not right.

But if your concerns expand beyond an occasional additional half hour of video games or a once-in-a-while second bowl of ice cream, you might consider the following:

Talk to the grandparents by starting with the positive. Always. No matter who I'm giving input to, I always try to

start by affirming what they are doing well. Begin the conversation by thanking your parents or in-laws for who they are and how they are investing in your kids. Give them specific examples of what you appreciate about how they support your family and shape your child.

Pick the right battles. You might have ten items you wish the grandparents would do differently, but that's eight items too many. Choose one or two as a focus for your conversation.

Emphasize what's best for your child.

You might try pointing out how staying up late all weekend can sabotage your child at school the next week. Or that bouncing back and forth from your family's regular rules to grandparent evenings without boundaries is confusing for your kid. The reality is, you're ultimately motivated by what's best for your child, so approach the conversation with that as the goal.

Give the grandparents a short article that explains your parenting strategy.

If having a discussion with your parents or in-laws seems fraught with conversational land mines, let someone

else share the message through an article or blog post.

If they are in some way hurting your child, separate them from your child.

If a grandparent's constant criticism or lack of attentiveness is potentially hurtful to your child, your priority is your child. Do what you have to do in order to prevent your child from absorbing messages that can damage their view of themselves and the world around them. If you suspect any form of abuse, separate your child immediately and consider whether outside authorities should be involved.

3

Closer to God = Closer to Your Grandkids

Across faith traditions, grandparents who are highly religious have stronger relationships with their grandchildren and are more involved in their lives.⁵ Given the previous finding about the power of grandparent involvement, that's an asset if the "highly religious" grandparent has dedicated their life to Christ. It can be a liability if the "highly religious" grandparent would rather nudge your kids away from Jesus and down a different faith path.

Watching our boys observe their grandfather care for their grandmother in the ten years that Alzheimer's was part of her life was amazing. They saw him be Christ in action.

—Alec

Sticky Ideas

This chapter is unlike the rest, for two reasons. First, most of the ideas for grandparents emerge not from our multiyear Sticky Faith study or from our fifty interviews with Sticky Faith parents. Instead they come from grandparents who are part of the Fuller Youth Institute community and who have used our research as a springboard to dive into deeper relationships with their grandkids.

Second, thanks to these amazing senior adults, we've discovered so many wonderful ideas that it was hard to sift through them and choose the best. So we opted to describe more "rapid-fire" ideas—in less detail and with fewer "Your Family" questions—than in any other chapter. If you are a senior adult, we hope you'll dig through these insights and unearth the treasure that helps you connect to your grandkids or other children special to you. If you are a parent, you might look for one or two ideas to pass along to your parents, your in-laws, or another senior adult to encourage their relationship with your children. At the end of the chapter, we'll ask each of you—grandparent or parent—to rate your effectiveness in this area of faith-building in your children and grandchildren.



Ideas That Can Be Done Any Day, at Any Time

- Start a book club with your grandkids. Invite them to keep a list of books that they've read (or that someone has read to them). Set a goal with them, and after they read the predetermined number of books, reward them with a small prize or special outing. Or perhaps you and your grandchild can agree to read the same book and then meet to discuss it over a treat.
- Take a few hours to teach your grandchildren about being mindful. As you eat together, talk about where your food comes from and who was involved with growing, transporting, and even selling the items. Take a walk in your neighborhood together, making an effort to be mindful of what you see, hear, and smell. When you are struck by something beautiful, thank God aloud for it.

- Since grandparents are often important bridges to children's family heritage, teach your grandchildren about their culture. Enjoy your favorite cultural art, dress, and customs together as an extended family. Help your grandchildren learn how to make specific cultural foods, or visit places in your community that have a poignant meaning or connection to your family background.

- Invite your grandchildren for sleepovers at your house. While they are over, engage in some of their favorite activities together. (Try to carve out time the next day so you can take a nap.)

- Don't just pray *for* your grandkids; pray *with* them also. As you pray, thank God aloud for the special qualities he has given them.

- Create a drama of a Bible story with your grandkids. Act it out whether or not you have an audience.

- Have a talent show together. Adults and children can participate. No act is too small!

- Write a prayer of blessing for your grandchildren, noting Scripture verses that you long to be true in their lives, both now and in the future. Keep a copy for yourself and give copies (maybe even framed) to your grandkids to remind them that they have a grandparent who is praying for them.

- Teach your grandchild a new skill or share one of your favorite hobbies with them, such as fishing, skiing, bicycling, or making jewelry.

- Let your grandchild teach *you* a new skill or share a hobby with you.

- Purchase or create a craft or science project that you can do with your grandchild.

My wife's dad was pretty uninvolved in her life when she was a teenager. But he's like a different man with our son. He even takes him every year to a major music festival where they camp and listen to lots of rock 'n' roll. As weird as it is that our son's grandfather takes him to this festival, our son is never, ever going to forget it. Our son might even someday take his own grandson to a festival.

—Anders

The Sticky Faith Guide for Your Family

- Enter a race and run, swim, ride, or walk it with your grandchild.
- Talk with your grandchild about a family tradition that you enjoyed with your own grandparents or parents and have passed along to your children. Then continue that tradition with your grandchild. Examples could include seeing fireworks together or going to a summer parade, having campfires and roasting marshmallows on the beach, seeing the *Nutcracker* ballet or making tamales during the Christmas season, or riding bikes to a favorite ice cream shop.
- Bring out photo albums and talk about when your grandchild was born, how you prayed for them even before they were born, how excited you were to first hold them, and how blessed you feel that they are now part of your family.
- Serve together at a local ministry.
- Feed homeless folks in your community.
- Play games together.
- Teach your grandchildren to sing, and enjoy singing with them. In the car, play a singing game by having each person take a turn humming a tune of a song you all know. The one who identifies that song gets to hum the next one.
- Plant flowers or a tree with your grandchild. Commemorate occasions (whether celebrations or challenging times) by planting special trees or plants. When you and your grandkids see those plants in the future, it will give you a chance to share about God's presence in the highs and lows of life.
- Cook with your grandchildren. While in the kitchen, play music and sing or even dance together.
- Build something with your grandchildren.
- Share times when you have blown it, or when you have disobeyed what you sensed God was telling you to do. Let your grandchildren know how glad you are that Jesus forgives you no matter what.



Ideas for Grandparents Who Live Farther Away

- Choose a book series to read with your grandchildren. Read to them using the phone or a videoconference service. As they get older and the books get longer, read separately and then use technology to discuss the book's highlights together.
- Write letters to your grandkids, telling them how much you love them, what you specifically love about them, and what gifts you see in them. Tell them how thankful you are that God has made them so special.
- Have breakfast together once a week using the phone or a videoconference service.
- Start a collection of something with your grandchild, such as dolls from other countries, interesting stones, matchbooks, coins, or colored glass. Continue adding to the collection when you travel or when you are together.
- Text them on an ordinary day and let them know you're thinking about them.
- Pray for your grandkids, and tell them the specific things you are asking God to do for them or show them.
- Send packages! Especially at holidays and birthdays when you are apart, packages with even small, inexpensive gifts or treats are memorable to kids. When they move away from home, send an occasional package to school with homemade cookies or a gift card to a coffee shop.
- Call or send a letter when kids have special events or milestones at school or church. For instance, while you may not be present for a baptism, calling your grandchild on that special day is still very memorable. The same can be true of soccer tournaments, school plays, or after a church retreat weekend.
- If financially possible, offer to pay travel expenses so your grandchild can come stay with you for a long weekend or more, without siblings or parents.



Ideas Involving Vacations or Extended Time Together

- Before your grandkids come for a visit, ask them some questions so you know what they want to do, such as, What do you want to do with Grandpa? How about with Grandma? What food would you like to eat? What places do you want to visit? What movie would you like to see? Where do you want to go with your cousins?
- On extended-family vacations, try to have morning or evening devotions that include questions that all family members can answer. This way, the children hear their parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins share on a deeper level.
- When your grandchild reaches the age of twelve or thirteen, take them on a weekend away with other significant adults of the same gender in your family, including their mom or dad and aunts or uncles. Have a planned activity that you do together (like skiing, hiking, going to a Broadway show, or camping). Include time to discuss what it means to be a Christian man or woman. Give your grandchild a lasting memento that will remind them of what they learned and committed to over the weekend.
- Host “Camp Grandparents” with your grandkids, either at your house or at another destination. Do things together that they would do at camp, such as crafts, sports, singing, cooking, and treasure hunts. This could last one day or several days. Or enroll them in a local half-day summer camp, then spend the other half of the day doing activities together. Local colleges, museums, and recreation centers often offer camps covering a wide variety of interests, such as art, science, computers, athletics, music, and nature, so be sure to check with your grandchild to find out what interests them. Or find a camp or campground that caters to family activities, and let that organization plan the programming and details.
- Go on a mission trip with your grandchild, either locally or abroad. Consider making this a rite-of-passage experience that you share with each grandchild as they reach a certain age.
- If possible, pay for your grandchild to attend a church camp and have them share about it with you afterward.

A Parent's Steps toward Sticky Faith

If you are a parent, take a few moments on your own, or with your spouse, your friends, or your small group, to reflect on some potential next steps toward Sticky Faith.

Sticky Findings

On a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 being “we stink at this” and 5 being “we rock at this”), rate your family on the research findings presented in this chapter.

- 1|** My kids have close relationships with senior adults, whether they be biological or functional grandparents.

① ② ③ ④ ⑤

- 2|** I feel good about the faith commitment and influence of these grandparents.

① ② ③ ④ ⑤

Sticky Ideas

- 1|** In what ways are senior adults already helping to instill Sticky Faith in your kids?

2| Given your ranking of the findings in the previous section, as well as the ideas you've read in this chapter, what one or two changes might you want to make in your family?

3| What can you do in the next few weeks or month to move toward these changes?

A Grandparent's Steps toward Sticky Faith

If you are a grandparent, take a few moments on your own, or with your spouse, your friends, or your small group, to reflect on how you can nudge your grandchildren, or other children you care about, toward a faith that lasts.

Sticky Findings

On a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 being “I stink at this” and 5 being “I rock at this”), rate yourself on the research findings presented in this chapter.

1| I have a close relationship with my grandkids.

① ② ③ ④ ⑤

2| My grandkids know about my faith.

① ② ③ ④ ⑤

3| I talk with my grandkids about my faith.

① ② ③ ④ ⑤

4| I regularly show my grandkids I care about them.

① ② ③ ④ ⑤

