

Grandparenting for Faith

Sharing God with the
children you love the most

Becky Sedgwick

'A great guide to the wonderful if bewildering responsibilities of being a Christian grandparent. Realistic, supportive and, above all, both helpful and hopeful.'

Revd Canon J. John, evangelist and author

'Grandparents are among the most significant spiritual influences in children's and teenagers' lives. Becky Sedgwick's brilliant book not only brings encouragement to grandparents, but solid equipping. This book is hopeful, realistic and deeply relevant to every grandparent, whether their grandchildren are babies, or adults with babies of their own. Best spiritual grandparenting book I have ever read!'

Rachel Turner, founder of Parenting for Faith

'*Grandparenting for Faith* is a liberating, convicting and exciting work. It will empower grandparents in all types of family settings and dynamics to be part of their grandchildren's lives and share their faith without damaging relationships with their adult children. Read and share this book, and learn how easy it is to answer God's call to grandparent for faith.'

Martha Flavell, children and family lead at Bible Society

'*Grandparenting for Faith* is packed full of practical ideas, and it breaks things down in a clear way that will leave grandparents encouraged by what they are already doing, equipped to be more intentional, and inspired that what they are doing will make a difference in the lives of their grandchildren.'

Olly Goldenberg, founder of Children Can

‘Every grandparent should read this book! It has lots of easy, practical suggestions for showing and living your Christian faith – without being at all heavy or ‘preachy’. I’m now eager to work on some of the ideas with my own six grandchildren.’

Penelope Swithinbank, priest, writer and grandmother

‘*Grandparenting for Faith* is a much-needed and encouraging resource for all who desire to leave a legacy of faith for the next generation. I’m convinced there has never been a greater need for grandparents to take seriously the influence they can have in the lives of their grandchildren.’

Linda Green, grandmother and co-author of *He Gives More Grace*

‘What a valuable book, whether your grandchildren live in Christian homes or are far from God. Becky writes with warmth and insight. She is always down to earth and full of practical wisdom. A book I shall return to frequently as I seek to play my part in discipling my eleven grandchildren.’

Bill Lattimer, principal of The Douglas Trust

‘What an inspiring and encouraging book for grandparents! Becky explains the significance of grandparenting for faith and gives lots of practical ideas in an accessible and non-judgemental way. She makes it relevant whether you have lots of contact with your grandchildren or none at all and everything in between. Such a helpful handbook to equip you in praying for your grandchildren throughout their lives.’

Caroline Montgomery, pioneer of Refresh at St Stephen’s Church, Twickenham

‘In these times of significant pressures among families, limited family time, low confidence among grandparents, confusion about roles within families and limited availability of support for families, this book is a very welcome tool. Beautifully written and very easy to read, it conveys a great awareness of the challenges of real life, while also prompting and encouraging grandparents to think beyond what they currently do and consider how they could develop their spiritual support of their grandchildren. I love this book. It is so much needed and I highly recommend it to all Christian grandparents who want to see their faith passed on to their children and grandchildren.’

Sarah Holmes, researcher and lecturer, Liverpool Hope University

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Ministries



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This book is dedicated to the memory of my mother,
Joan Sedgwick, who loved being a grandparent and who
would have loved to have seen this book.

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INTRODUCTION

Painting poppies

One day I was watching a video of an artist creating a water-colour picture. This one taught you how to create a painting of a field of poppies. I watched, fascinated, as the artist dropped odd splatters of colours and dots here and there on the blurry canvas. Gradually, as different splashes were added and gaps filled in, all those individual spots and dots emerged into a coherent picture. What began as a seemingly random collection of marks on the canvas started to join up and reveal a beautiful and striking painting of poppies.

Discipleship is like that. Think about how Jesus taught his twelve disciples. There were no systematic Bible classes, memory verses or sermon series. It started with an invitation: follow me (Matthew 9:9). And then, as they did life together, odd bits of learning happened here and there. They saw how Jesus took care to spend time with his Father. They watched as he healed. They had chats about who is the greatest, and what being a disciple really meant. They ate together and tramped the length of the country. They heard Jesus teaching, and they laughed as he outwitted the Pharisees. And they saw him in the depths of despair as the cost of following God's purpose for his life became

horribly and painfully clear that first Easter.¹ Gradually all those individual conversations, experiences and observations joined up into a beautiful and coherent picture of who God is and who he wants us to be, enabling the disciples to emerge as confident and committed followers of Jesus.

If you've picked up this book, chances are it's because you have a longing to disciple your grandchildren; to help them meet and know the God whom you love. But you might not feel you know how to do that. As grandparents, it's unlikely that you see your grandchildren every day, have control over their church attendance or are fully aware of what's happening in their lives. Jesus may seem to be totally present in their homes, totally absent or something in between. You may lack confidence that you can pass on faith to your grandchildren, or you might just not see them very much. You may worry about what your grandchild's parents think about your faith or whether you have even got permission to talk about it. You may feel like you aren't a good enough Christian or know enough to help your grandchildren learn about God, or you may worry that there are so many other influences shouting loudly in their lives that your little contribution won't make a difference.

Sometimes, when we long for people we love to meet and know God, we can feel stuck. Some of you might feel your grandchildren are so very far from God, living in an agnostic family, caught up with their social life or struggling to make sense of their parents' nasty separation. You might wonder how your limited time and influence can help them. However, God doesn't expect you to solve or even understand

everything. He's working all the time to bring his kingdom into those situations. Your role is to check in with him and discover your next steps. You may know immediately what your next step is, or it may simply be to pray, to watch and to wait, and then, when you see your next step, to take it. So throughout this book, you'll see some prompts to help you explore with God what your next steps might be.

As you read this book, take heart! Remember the poppies. Discipling your grandchildren is simply about journeying alongside them and helping them gradually paint a picture of who God is and who he wants them to be, and encouraging them to meet and know him for themselves. Every time you share a story about who God is, or point out what God is doing, or let your grandchildren see you connecting with God yourself, you're dropping another splash of colour on to their canvas. You might not be able to paint the whole picture for them, but your splashes of colour will join splashes other people and God himself are adding.

This book takes the proven tools and skills taught in Parenting for Faith and equips you to use them as a grandparent.

The first part of the book will help you discover how you are part of God's plan for your grandchildren's discipleship, whether they are babies, children, teens or adults, and covers some important truths that grandparents need to know. The second part, the grandparent's toolkit, shares some simple ways you can help your grandchildren meet and know God – from why prayer is the bedrock of all we do, through to how to explain who God is or show how he impacts your

life. We end with part three, where we explore how we can help grandchildren connect with God for themselves and think about how we can cheer them on.

You may already be helping your grandchildren to meet and know God and, if so, we are going to encourage you and give you some additional, practical ideas. If this is new to you, or even just a dream, we'll introduce you to ideas to get you started and a host of ways that might work in your family and situation. If your grandchildren are younger, we've included suggestions for using the ideas with babies and toddlers. If your grandchildren are older, or even flown the nest, this book is full of ideas for them too. This book is for you all.

Grandparents are an integral part of God's plan for children's discipleship. Whatever your circumstances, whatever your family situation, if you are grandparenting, you can grandparent for faith.

You've got this!

Remember the poppies. One splash at a time.

No one said it would
be easy

The third truth that grandparents need to know is that no one said it would be easy.

When we interviewed grandparents as part of the research for this book, one of the things we didn't expect was how quickly most of the interviewees told us that being a grandparent wasn't straightforward. What they explained was this: parenting is hard enough, but grandparenting is a whole different ball game. Family dynamics can be tricky: people fall ill; tragedy strikes; there are unexpected struggles or differences of opinion; and faith itself can cause issues. Families face all sorts of ups and downs, and grandparents get to watch it all play out.

There are many times when grandparents feel powerless, or hopeless, or just confused about what to do when faced with the whirling lives of their grandchildren and children – and they may also be asking: how can I help my family meet and know the love and power of God in these circumstances?

As Christians, our first port of call is always prayer. We will explore ideas and encouragement for grandparents as they pray in chapter 4, but as you face tricky situations, remember that when we pray, we access God's shelter, strength and wisdom. He truly is 'our refuge and

strength, an ever-present help in trouble'.¹ Pray that God will show you your next steps as you walk alongside them: what is the one next thing I can do to help them discover who God is? Pray for God to place Christian friends and colleagues around them who can speak into their lives. Pray for yourselves, for wisdom and hope.

Life as a Christian grandparent can be harder, because there's this extra thread of faith you are trying to thread through different situations. But as a Christian grandparent you get to pray and share the stuff that concerns you with God.

In part II, we'll look at some practical tools and skills grandparents can use to help share faith with their grandchildren. But first, let's take a moment to look at some common situations you might find yourself in and share some ideas that will set you up to use those skills and tools well.

When your children don't share your faith

Imagine an heirloom quilt, lovingly stitched by great-grandma, passed down to each generation. You loved it, spread it proudly over your bed every day and enjoyed the warmth it brought. And then, when the time was right, you passed it on to your child. But you soon discover that

your adult child isn't using the quilt. It's not on the bed; it's packed away in a cupboard. Maybe it's brought out when you visit, or used at special occasions like Christmas. But it's just not relevant to your modern child with their own ideas and influences.

Faith can feel like that. Many of us made sure that faith was something our children knew and experienced during their childhood. They came with us to church, read their Bibles, seemed to have some sort of faith – but as they grew older, faith got pushed to the edges of their lives and maybe seemed to disappear altogether. We tried to pass on our faith, but it got packed away in a cupboard.

Your adult child might have changed their faith or married someone of another faith. You might have come to faith later in life and weren't able to bring your children up knowing God. Some might never seem to have understood faith or have rejected it, and that can feel hard.

Mary and Paul, two of the wise grandparents we interviewed, told us this: 'Know it's not all on you. You're not responsible if children and grandchildren decide not to follow Jesus – it's their free choice.' Even so, you may be grieving or feel ashamed or like you've failed. But there's good news. It's never too late for your adult children to meet God and know the joy of having him in their lives. There is always hope, because God is a God of hope.

So what can you do practically to encourage your adult children meet and know God? Everyone's family is unique

and how you share faith will depend on so many factors. But here are some ideas to help you figure out your next steps.

- 1 **Build your relationships with your children as well as your grandchildren and love them unreservedly.** The more connected you are, the more influence you will have and the more opportunities to share who God is.
- 2 **Reshape your view.** The phrase ‘pass on your faith’ implies that it’s a done deal – you’ve either done it or you haven’t. But that’s not how faith works. As Christians, we’re not passing on a set of religious activities and beliefs. We’re passing on a relationship with a God who, for us, has been an amazing God. If we think less about ‘passing on faith’ and more about ‘helping someone discover who God is’, then it becomes easier to see that this is something you can do as a parent of an adult child. The ideas in part II will help you with this.
- 3 **Reflect on the barriers.** Sometimes people struggle to know or like God because there are barriers to them doing so. If you can identify any obvious barriers, that may give you an important next step, such as explaining something that happened in the past, or apologising, or asking questions. Examples of barriers might include:
 - never really understanding who God is; he just isn’t relevant to me and my life
 - having big questions that haven’t been adequately answered, such as ‘Why does God allow suffering?’ or ‘How can you believe in God and science?’

- being hurt by church or seeing a disconnect between what Christians say and what they do
- feeling that they aren't good enough for God because of their lifestyle, choices or past.

4 Don't let faith become a bone of contention. Faith – or the lack of it – is only one part of who your children are. Don't try to enforce your beliefs on them, and even if you don't agree with all their choices or opinions, try to understand their views and be gentle if you disagree.

Don't put pressure on faith things. Don't say, 'When are the babies going to be baptised', even if the fact they haven't been baptised is painful for you, if you sense it might not be welcome or helpful.

When you're not allowed to talk about faith

Grace and Harry's son-in-law laid down the law: 'I will not allow you to talk about God or church with your grandchildren.' They recoiled from the shock – not just the sadness of not being able to share God with their precious grandsons, but also the practicalities of how even to talk about their church-filled lives without transgressing this rule.

Many grandparents face situations where faith is an issue with their families and sometimes any talk of God or church will be frowned upon or met with hostility or even anger.

Alongside praying for your family, in these circumstances what can grandparents do?

1 Respect the parents' decisions and boundaries about faith matters. Your children are now the adults, making their own choices and parenting decisions; make it clear that you respect their right to hold their views so that you don't damage your relationship with them or erode trust.

We are careful to respect their wishes. We asked and were allowed to give our granddaughter a Bible storybook for Christmas two years ago, but weren't allowed to give her another one.

2 Try to understand their views. If you can, ask about their views so you can understand what motivates them and what they fear about you sharing your faith with their children. If you can, explain gently how their decision impacts you.

3 Make it clear that they are important to you and you love them. Family relationships can be complicated enough without faith differences. When faith is so important to you, you could accidentally alienate children who don't share your beliefs. If everyone else is joyously celebrating Easter, how can you ensure they don't feel left out? If it's Sunday and you normally go to church, but your children are visiting, how will they feel?

4 Ask for permission before you expose your grandchildren to anything about God or church. Perhaps explain that the Bible's an important part of

your family's heritage and so would it be okay to give your grandchild a Bible? Or would they be happy if Darcy came to the holiday Bible club at church while she's staying with you?

- 5 Remember that faith isn't only communicated or demonstrated through words.** Your grandchildren will be noticing what inspires you, what your values are, how you live – and this will have an impact. God is working behind the scenes, and one day, your grandchildren will be old enough to ask you themselves about your faith.

When contact is hard

Sue sat in her homegroup and shared yet another tale of the continual bickering between her and her daughter. 'And now she won't let Ryan come round to see me!' she said. Another nanna wept as she explained that she had no idea why, but her son refused to have any contact with her at all. How can grandparents share God when you never see your grandchildren or contact is just plain hard?

- 1 Pray.** The Common English Bible translation of 1 Peter 5:7 says this: 'Throw all your anxiety onto him, because he cares about you.' In such a tough situation, throw your fears, your sorrow, your grief at God. He cares for you – and for your grandchildren. One grandma we interviewed said: 'Choose not to be a worrier for your children but a prayer warrior'. Prayer is your secret weapon.

- 2 **Be ready to build bridges.** Family life is complicated! As you reflect on your situation, God might poke your heart about something you may have said or done that has contributed to this disconnection. If he points anything out, do be quick to offer an apology, explain things, forgive or ask for forgiveness.
- 3 **Prioritise connection.** We've seen how important connection is. So do all you can to re-establish or strengthen the connection you have with your children or grandchildren. Revisit the ideas in chapter 2 and see if there is anything you might want to try. By focusing on being as connected as you can to your family, you are making so much more possible.
- 4 **Keep asking God for your next steps, and be prepared for these to be quite ordinary.** One distressed nanna told the story of how her young granddaughter refused to have any contact with her, and she just didn't know what to do. At a grandparenting for faith group, someone suggested just asking God for her next step. A week later, Audrey came in beaming. 'God told me to invite Sophie to come with me in the car when I was going to visit her aunty,' she said, 'and she came!' That simple step changed everything.

When your family is in pain

'Ever since they moved,' Jenny said, 'Pete and Gemma just haven't settled into church and the children miss it. They

really need to find a new church family.’ David’s eyes brimmed with tears as he described how powerless he felt when he discovered his beloved grandson had been cutting himself.

How painful it is to watch someone you love struggle. Sadly, it seems that this is a non-negotiable part of the job description for grandparents. It can feel hard to know how to make a difference – particularly for those of us who have faith, how to help your family know the love and power of God in those circumstances.

My grandmother lost her first baby girl at eight months old, and I lost my first baby girl at birth. The fact that I knew she was praying for me and my husband with faith gave me hope and comfort. She would often remind me that she is praying that the Lord would bless us again with a child very soon, and he did!

1 Offer what help you can – even if you can’t do much.

One of the most powerful things people need when they are in trouble is to have people alongside them who will listen and hold them. Unless it will make the situation worse, always offer to pray and keep checking in with how you can pray next.

2 Know when to interfere and when not to. There will be times when you long to put your two-pennyworth in. But before you do, it’s worth checking your motive. Is this something that’s causing you real concern – the family

is arguing frequently, or the grandchildren staying out way too late and getting into trouble – or is this just about a difference in parenting style, disliking your granddaughter’s dummy, or wishing your grandkids were reading books instead of being glued to a screen. If you have genuine concerns, then try to gently and non-judgementally raise them. But if it’s just a difference of opinion about how to parent, don’t interfere – even if it’s hard not to.

- 3 Be a safe place for your grandchildren.** As mentioned in chapter 2, research into the impact of grandparents on their grandchildren repeatedly reports that when a grandchild is in crisis or their family situation is difficult, the presence of a loving grandparent can make all the difference.² As much as you can, be available for grandchildren who may be struggling: be proactive in getting in touch; offer what you can; listen well; don’t judge; and love well. You can also be a safe place for a grandchild who might worry that their lifestyle or choices might alienate them from you. As Anita Cleverley says:

Let’s choose to be such people, unshockable and unafraid of the multifarious social and sexual landscape we all inhabit, and that will help us, whatever our grandchildren’s life choices, to offer one of the most precious gifts a grandparent can give – unconditional love.³

When you are struggling

We all struggle from time to time. Grandparents may struggle with the normal challenges of growing older, such as health problems and increasing frailty, but there can be other challenges too. One grandma talked about how debilitating it was trying to grandparent for faith when her husband was unsupportive and uninterested in God. Another grandparent related how, after her son came round to announce they were moving from down the road to 200 miles away, she was unexpectedly and profoundly struck with grief at the loss of their beloved granddaughters. Grandparenting may feel that bit harder when you are struggling yourself.

So what might help you when this happens?

- 1 Remember that God's involved in all of this.** His intention has always been that grandparents are part of his design for helping grandchildren meet and know God – and that doesn't change because your situation is less than ideal. He's with you on this journey and is working all the time to bring his kingdom into those situations.
- 2 Remember that God knows what you can manage.** If you are struggling, remember that God knows that. There's a beautiful picture of God in John 21 when Peter sees the resurrected Jesus for the first time. Jesus pulls his friend aside and asks him, 'Peter, do you love me?' What our English translations don't convey here is that the word Jesus uses for love is *agape*. He is asking Peter

if he loves him with that unconditional God-love. But Peter, still full of guilt from his betrayal of Jesus, can't look him in the eye. 'Jesus,' he replies, 'you know I love you' – but Peter can only promise the ordinary love for a brother – *philo*. Jesus gently repeats the question, and again, Peter is unable to say he loves Jesus with *agape* love. But then there comes a moment which brings hope to all of us who feel inadequate or unable. Jesus asks the question again, but this time starting where Peter is: 'Peter, do you *philo* me?' God knows that sometimes we can't do it all, and that's okay.

3 Get yourself some support. The British are renowned for their stiff upper lip, and it can feel very hard to talk freely about your families. And it might feel extra hard to open up to Christian friends if you are painfully aware that your family might not live up to the image of the perfect Christian family. But getting some support for yourself will make all the difference. Having others around us when we need help is one of the most wonderful gifts of church – because it's so hard doing it on our own. Take inspiration from the story of Moses, Aaron and Hur in Exodus 17:

Joshua did as Moses commanded him and went out to fight the Amalekites, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. As long as Moses held up his arms, the Israelites won, but when he put his arms down, the Amalekites started winning. When Moses' arms grew tired, Aaron and Hur brought a stone for him to sit on, while they stood beside him

and held up his arms, holding them steady until the sun went down. In this way Joshua totally defeated the Amalekites.

EXODUS 17:10–13 (GNT)

You may already have trusted friends who are your Aaron and Hur, but if not, ask God to show you who will hold your arms up and provide the support and encouragement you need – and then be courageous enough to ask them if they will join you for a season as you grandparent for faith in whatever situation your family is in.

God's not finished with them yet

Sometimes, in family life, it can seem so hard to see or even imagine God is at work, let alone that your grandchildren might ever get to meet and know God.

Catherine had walked away from God aged 16, convinced that being gay meant that she couldn't love or be loved by God. Her family watched over the next 30 years as she forged a successful career, married her long-term partner and settled into a busy and happy life – and grieved that she seemed so far from God. And then, seemingly within the space of a few weeks, everything changed. Catherine rang her mum. 'I'm going to church,' she said. 'I've become a Christian.' Within months, she'd been baptised and had set her eyes firmly on Jesus.

Catherine's family were astounded. But as she shared her story with them, they realised that although there had been no outward signs of it, God had been steadily working in Catherine's life for years. A desire to keep her childhood Bible. Discovering Christian radio by accident when she couldn't tune in to her normal show. Questions that she longed to know the answer to.

Be encouraged. Whatever it looks like on the outside, God's not finished with your family yet. As you pray for your grandchildren and their families, keep asking God for your next step. He's on the case!

Notes

1 Psalm 46:1.

2 Ann Buchanan and Julia Griggs, 'The impact of grandparental involvement on child well-being', *'My Second Mum and Dad': The involvement of grandparents in the lives of teenage grandchildren*, research report (Grandparents Plus, August 2009), [kinship.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/My-Second-Mum-and-Dad-research-report.pdf](https://www.kinship.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/My-Second-Mum-and-Dad-research-report.pdf), ch. 7; Ann Buchanan and Anna Rotkirch, 'Twenty-first century grandparents: global perspectives on changing roles and consequences', *Contemporary Social Science* 13.2 (2018), doi.org/10.1080/21582041.2018.1467034, p. 137.

3 Anita Cleverley, *Faithful Grandparents: Hope and love through the generations* (BRF, 2019), p. 134.



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Grandparenting brings new life and joy...

... and also the opportunity to walk spiritually alongside our grandchildren. In this book, Becky Sedgwick explores how grandparents can actively encourage and equip their grandchildren to meet and know God, offering tools and skills for the journey. Whatever your circumstances, God has positioned you to be a unique voice speaking into your grandchildren's lives, helping to nurture them into the reality of a relationship with the God who loves them.

'A great guide to the wonderful if bewildering responsibilities of being a Christian grandparent. Realistic, supportive and, above all, both helpful and hopeful.'

Revd Canon J. John, evangelist and author



Becky Sedgwick is the resources coordinator for Parenting for Faith. She has been equipping parents and carers and their wider families for the past 15 years, both as a children and families leader in her local church and more recently at Parenting for Faith.

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