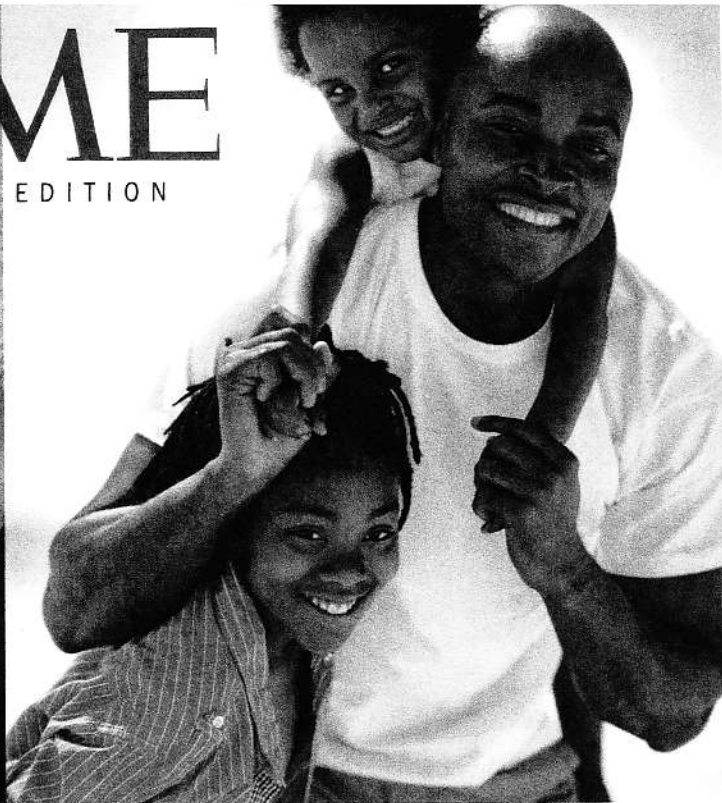
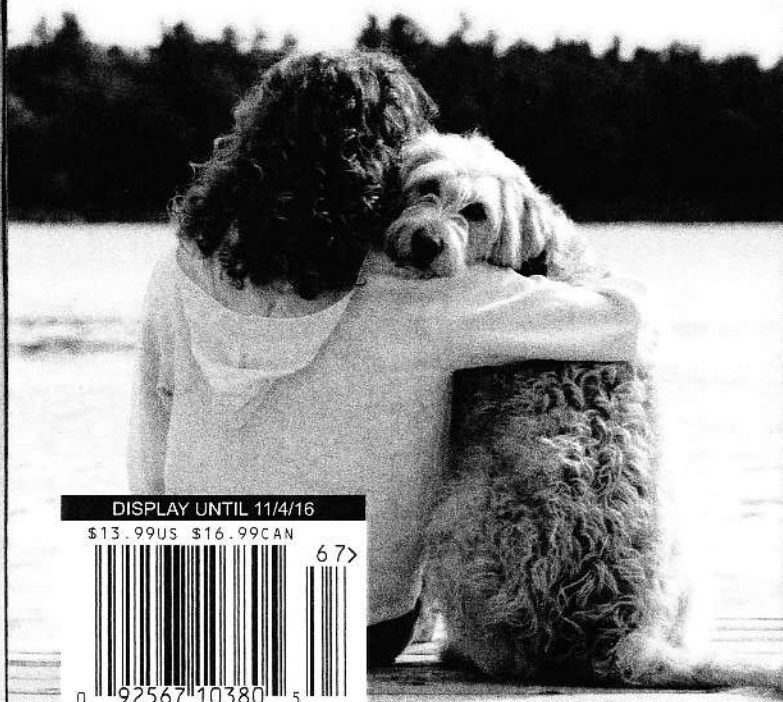


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# The Grandmother Effect

Research shows that grandmothers may have a strong influence on the health of humankind

By Alexandra Sifferlin

**I**F YOU WANT TO KNOW THE SECRET to a longer life, look to someone who's already lived one: a grandmother. The benefits of being around a grandma go far beyond absorbing her accumulated wisdom, new research is finding. Grandmothers, it turns out, have a unique, positive impact on people in their communities.

That's a good thing, since more and more households are becoming multigenerational. During the recession, adult children moved back in with their parents in record numbers, spiking the number of grandparents living with their grandchildren. Now, with the elderly living longer than ever, more than 4 million households in the U.S. include both grandparents and their grandchildren.

In an ongoing study at Case Western Reserve University, researchers have followed close to 500 grandmothers in Ohio for more than a decade to understand what happens when they become primary caregivers in

multigenerational families. "We know that grandmothers who are involved with babysitting tend to be in better health, and that is obviously beneficial to the extended family," says Carol Musil, a professor at the university and the study's lead author. It's not yet clear whether babysitting is responsible for that health boost, but, she says, "those grandmothers generally tend to like what they are doing."

Health-wise, grandmothers aren't the only ones to benefit. They wield a powerful influence on the nutritional habits of both mothers and children—much stronger than that of the men in the family, found one study published in the journal *Maternal and Child Nutrition* that looked at the role of grandmothers in developing countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Grandmothers also play essential roles as advisers to younger women and caregivers to children, it found.

All of the advantages the study authors saw led them to a rather quirky conclusion: that public health interventions seeking to improve

the well-being of a community should focus on grandmothers.

They're not the only ones to think so. According to the "grandmother hypothesis," devised by University of Utah researchers in the 1990s, the influence of grandmothers reaches far beyond the family bubble. Grandmothers may have given mankind a biological advantage for a longer life.

The idea credits the grandmothers of the distant past with helping keep their grandchildren fed, thus allowing humans to evolve to live longer than their primate relatives. Most mammals learn to hunt and gather their own food after being weaned, but researchers studying older women in hunter-gatherer communities in Tanzania learned that when grandmothers participate in feeding and caring for their grandchildren, that allows their own daughters to have more children over a shorter time period. This provides healthy grandmothers with more descendants to whom they can pass on longevity genes. "Grandmother effects alone are sufficient to propel the doubling of life spans in less than sixty thousand years," wrote the University of Utah researchers who reported

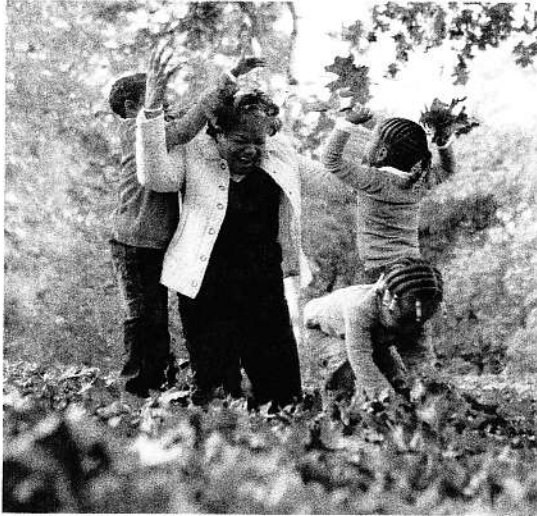
on the hypothesis in a 2012 research paper.

Aside from imparting a genetic disposition to longer life, the hypothesis holds that grandmothers may be responsible for another kind of legacy: monogamy. In a 2015 study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, researchers argued that as humans gained longer life spans thanks to Grandma's genes and help with child-rearing, women's fertility began to decline after a certain age, while males remained fertile for longer. Men had fewer fertile women to mate with, so it became advantageous for men to protect one woman and remain reproductively attached to her—a key reason for modern monogamy.

Not everyone agrees that grandmothers played such an outsize role in human evolution. Some critics point out that in most ancestral societies, it is the men, instead, who are still in charge of hunting and feeding the family.

And the same research showing the benefits of modern-day grandmothers, in which grandmothers play a central role in raising children, also suggests that it can have some downsides. "Grandmothers raising grandchildren tend to come from more difficult





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— CAROL MUSIL, Case Western Reserve University

circumstances,” Musil says. That sacrifice can take a toll: the findings of the Case Western study revealed that when grandmothers move back into caregiving, their own well-being can decline. “They tend to sometimes neglect their health,” says Musil, and the physical and emotional stressors of caring for family members can strain an age group already prone to health complications. Grandmothers in Musil’s studies have said that their concern over their children’s struggles adds to their stress. They sometimes report wishing that they could be more of a grandmother to their grandkids instead of a parent.

More research is needed on the unique influence of grandmothers, but it’s clear they’re incredibly important, especially today. Entrepreneurs have caught on, monetizing grandmothers to give their protective (and possibly life-extending) care to those who need it most. In 2011, Todd Pliss quit tutoring to launch Rent a Grandma, a company that allows people looking for child care, pet care, housecleaning or cooking services to connect with an experienced grandmother looking to earn some cash on the side. “It occurred to me, if you are going to hire someone, why not someone with decades of experience?” says Pliss. About 1,200 grandmothers have signed up, and Pliss plans to launch an app soon for faster connections.

Linda Terry, a 67-year-old grandmother in Murrieta, Calif., has used Rent a Grandma to

pick up babysitting gigs and make money after retirement. “It allows you to have a purpose which is valuable to a family,” she says. Terry has four grown children of her own, as well as grandchildren, but she says she missed helping out with child care. Doing so for other families eased her loneliness, helped her make new friends with other families and gave her a purpose.

Plus, grandmothers like Terry are good at what they do. With decades of experience, they’re formidable babysitters compared with, say, a 16-year-old. Pliss says his clients recognize this and enjoy having an older sitter who won’t be spending time on Snapchat instead of watching their kids. Terry agrees. “I think families appreciate having someone in the home who doesn’t want to be a best friend to their child but is really more interested in watching after them and giving them a bit of a moral guidance rather than to be one of the kids,” she says.

And while Terry admits she’s a little burnt out from a lifestyle of domestic labor, she thinks that services that put grandmothers like her to work are critical. “When people quit working they go downhill,” she says.

That’s why, when other grandmothers are at casinos or playing bingo, Terry is glad that she’s busy teaching a new batch of children the ways of the world. “It’s something worthwhile,” she says. “It’s a good feeling: to know that because of your work, this family’s life is better.”