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Clara Ingram Johnson

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COOPERATIVE EXTENSION WORK
IN AGRICULTURE AND HOME ECONOMICS
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5515

THIS GRANDMOTHERING BUSINESS
Clara Ingram Judson

What do you remember about your grandmothers? I remember mine as charming women, useful, helpful, kind and loving - oh, if only my grandchildren can have memories of me as delightful as I have of my grandmothers, I shall feel I have lived a successful life indeed! But it is only recently, since becoming a grandmother myself that I have given the slightest thought about preparing myself for this most important job.

The First Grandchild

Not even in the first few days after my first grandson was born did I realize my new estate for my thought centered around my daughter so completely, that, though I was happy about the baby, he didn't suggest to my mind an entirely new relationship. I have heard people say, "I enjoy my grandchildren more than I did my own because I haven't any responsibility for them." I certainly don't feel that way. I like responsibility. I thrive on it. I like to plan and execute.

One of the most significant hours of my life was on that day that my daughter, her devoted husband and her young son came home after her hospital stay and settled down in their own home. Their plans were beautifully made, everything went well - and there just wasn't anything I needed to do. It was a black hour for me. Suddenly the dismaying thought occurred - I could help them more by going home and leaving them, than by staying. They were an entity without me! And I so willing - there literally wasn't anything I would not have done for those three and what they needed most after the upsetting days of the couple of weeks before, was to be alone. I recall that I sat out in the car for half an hour (and of course it would rain pitchforks, wouldn't you just know?), well, I sat there and grew up. It did me good. But it wasn't easy. Then and there I learned the first lesson of being a good grandmother - to remember all the time that one is not a parent, but a grandparent - one step removed from the joys and responsibilities, cares, fun and work.

If you are lucky enough to get this well in mind at the start it makes every thing easier from then on but it's something that some women never do learn, so beware!

The Ideal Grandmother

That day I began wondering about this grandmother business and trying to decide what makes a good one. It's simple as A, B, C. and A is remembering her place as Grandparent, not parent. B is to remember her place and find what contribution she can make to the life of her grandchildren - what she can do without stepping out of her role as grandparent. And C is to remember her place as grandmother and to learn that most difficult lesson that absence and silence often does a finer service than anything else of which she could possibly think.

Now all this which I have said, and most of what I shall say later, fits the normal circumstances when the grandchild's parents are living and are taking the

care and responsibility for their own child. It is not supposed to fit the not uncommon but none-the-less abnormal situation wherein the parents by death or some other reason have left the child in the grandparent's care. In such a case the grandmother must try her level best to fill the place of the parents and she will have none of the problems we are talking about this morning. She will have plenty others - but not these.

In the normal run of living there are two ways of contact with grandmother - some live in the same house with the grandchildren and some don't. The grandmother who lives in the house with her grandchildren must be busy every minute remembering that the children's mother comes first until the attitude of mind gets so well learned that she can forget it.

Ideas on child Rearing Change for Better

Before we talk more perhaps it will be fun to send our minds back over the years and discover what the changes in ideas about child raising have been in this last generation. There have been a good many. I lived in eastern Indiana, in a very small town when my babies were little and I went visiting to my mother in Chicago where I got "new ideas" every six months. We mothers of a generation ago scorned codliver oil - it had no value at all and was used only because of a hold-over reputation that science did not sponsor. Of course I didn't use it. Fortunately my babies had lots of fresh air and sunshine, far more than most of the babies of my friends and somehow we escaped rickets.

But as my fine sturdy grandsons are given their codliver oil now, three times a day, my daughters both wonder how it happens they themselves ever grew up! I took my babies out daily, rain, wind or shine, but that was not the approved method of the day and I was considered very venturesome and queer. We were very concerned about individualism and self expression. My husband and I thought that theory should be mixed with considerable common sense so we did not go to the lengths our friends did. But I well remember some households where one never said no to a young child lest his character be warped by being thwarted - doesn't that notion seem ridiculous now? Children were cared for tenderly but in a way that kept them dependent much too long. The Montessorri method came along more than twenty years ago and I recall that some of my friends were horrified at the thought of making a three-year-old child undress herself, pick up toys and eat with out help.

How different and how much better is the thought of today. We have learned by our mistakes that while we need to develop individuals, these individuals must take their places in a busy world, must stand on their own feet and must respect the rights of others. I shouldn't care to meet on the road a man who insisted on driving a car at any speed he fancied and with a complete disregard of the rules of the road. We are happier and more successful when we respect the rights of others as well as our own. We have learned that man's first duty is to look after himself. The sooner a little child learns to feed, dress, amuse and look after himself, the sooner he will get into the habit of mind of being independent.

Perhaps we were coming this way a generation ago, only the independence we talked of then too often went against law and order and the comfort of others. Now

we know we must all fit together comfortably if we are to be happy. A child must learn (and the sooner the better) to control his emotions and to depend on himself for comfort and for inspiration; he must develop in himself a self-starter. This is not to say that he will never get sympathy nor help but that he must not depend upon others for what he should learn to provide for himself. The world needs men and women of strength, self-reliance and courage. We cannot begin too young to teach those qualities.

Now all this is not so simple for grandmother who perhaps had quite a different aim as her goal when her children were little. Of course we wanted our children to become fine men and women. Indeed we expected them to (and lots of us accomplished our desires, I'm glad to say) but we perhaps thought that we should go about it in a different way. Our grandchildren catch us at a time of life when we are groping for a job. Our immediate work of raising our family is done; we don't get any particular thrill out of amusing ourselves, we'd rather work; we always have, we like work and while we may talk about wanting to quit, just try to make us! And along come the grandchildren!

Your own young people have their own notions and independent ideas and want neither advice nor help - but the babies are just as sweet, just as helpless, just as lovable as babies always are and our love for them comes near to being our undoing! Memories come floating back - we put diapers on this way (our hands could do it without our eyes looking on and the new mother fumbles at first); we fed this, we gave water, so; we let them sleep when they wanted to sleep; and we fed them when they were hungry. Never would we have thought of putting them to bed to "cry it out" and if we had, the neighbors wouldn't have let us! If anyone thinks it is easy to sit back and let untried, inexperienced young parents tackle the job of caring for a baby just let them try it! It isn't easy one minute.

But stop and ask yourself - how did you get so experienced? What have you been doing all these years but trying to raise up a son and daughter who would be better educated, better equipped, better controlled than we were? Can't you trust them now? Didn't you learn by the trial and error method and isn't it better than a thousand theories? In the answers to such questions you will find your strength and your line of action. Give the parents a chance. And I'll tell you a secret: if you can go about your business and keep still (not with that thin-lipped, strained stillness that is so deadly to tolerate but with the happy silence that admits that the matter at hand is in good care) then you'll be asked to give help - not always, not as often as you'd like perhaps, but you'll be asked. And your advice, when it is sought, will be considered; your restraint will place you in a post of dignity and honor - that YOU CANNOT GET IN ANY OTHER WAY!

Become a Grandmother of Distinction

Now I have spoken at some length about what a grandmother's place ISN'T. What, then, is it? Oh, she has a wonderful place all her own. She can back up the parents, never going behind them, never doing or allowing done what they do not approve, but re-enforcing law and order and being jolly about it so that law and order seem fun.

She can win the respect of her grandchildren by being a person of distinction. By that I mean a person who thinks well of herself and who lives a happy life - in herself. Contrary to popular opinion, respect cannot be taught, it can only be earned. A pretended respect, a surface respect can be taught - but who wants it? Real respect is earned and to gain it, you must first of all respect yourself. Respect your body, keep it as beautiful as possible. Respect your clothing, keeping it fresh and becoming.

I remember my grandmother Ingram always dressed the same - she didn't attempt to follow the mode. But she always had a lovely bit of white lace at her neck held by a pin that grandfather had given her. Hands were scarred with work, but they were clean and soft - never grimy and hard as were the hands of some other girls' grandmothers I knew. She had no money for fine creams but she was faithful with her mutton tallow which she skillfully rendered herself. Her hair was soft and white, not yellowed, and her scalp was healthy and pink. I recall being so proud of her distinction and good looks, and as I grew older, of her pep in keeping herself so nice looking.

Grandmother must respect her own personality. She must stand on her own feet emotionally and not depend on her children. Many a woman who prides herself on money independence, is an emotional bankrupt needing her children's gaiety, her children's friends to fill her life. Grandmother should plan her own recreation, have her own friends, be a person in her own right, only so can she make her place. Don't let's be hangers-on; let's be people of strength.

If we so order our lives we can bring a real contribution to our family life, culturally, emotionally, intellectually and in the work-a-day world. No one pretends it is easy to keep in the background when background is needed and then in a pinch, step front and pitch in to work and responsibility. No one pretends it is simple to keep still when things might go better (or so we fondly think) if we took the helm. But who wants the easy task? I don't, do you? And who can be expected to do the hard one but we who have lived? If life hasn't taught us something - oh, but it has! And one of the first lessons is that we can do the job that is ours at the moment. If we were to be mothers, we would be the best mothers we knew. Now that we are grandmothers, we're going to do that job well too. Just watch us.

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