
Granny's Virtual Visit: Sharing Life Events Between Grandparents and Grandchildren

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Abstract

Few systems have been designed specifically to enable grandparents and grandchildren to share major life events. We also see few studies that have investigated the actual needs and interests of these groups for being involved in each other's life and the types of experiences that they want to share. To address this gap, we conducted an interview and diary study of distance-separated grandparents and young grandchildren (aged 3-10) from the perspective of the grandparents and parents of the children. Our main goal was to explore what various activities and life events grandparents and grandchildren were interested in sharing with each other over distance. We also sought to understand the social challenges, concerns, and conflicts that might arise during such sharing.

Introduction

Imagine the following three scenarios involving, in turn, a grandson, a parent, and a grandparent:

Mason (8 years old, Vancouver, Canada) is playing for his school's hockey team and thought that it would be awesome if his grandparents could be able to attend his game once in a while; however, both of his grandparents are elderly and suffer from some chronic illnesses. This means they cannot easily travel to see Mason play.

Sara (32 years old, Brisbane, Australia) is originally from Iran and would love her only child to celebrate the Iranian New Year and national holidays with her parents who still live in Iran. She thinks her daughter would feel closer to her grandparents as a result. She also thinks it would be valuable for her daughter to become familiar with some of her native cultural ceremonies in addition to the new culture that she is growing up with in Australia.

Charlotte (65 years old, Toronto, Canada) is a grandmother of a six year old granddaughter. Since her son and his family moved to Europe several years ago, she feels that she has missed many great moments in her grandchild's life starting with the day she was born, her first steps, her first words, and later her first day at school.

These are a few examples of the types of situations that grandchildren, parents, and grandparents face in relation to staying in touch with one another over distance. In fact, the complexity of modern life such as geographical separation, family issues such as divorce or poor relationships between parents and grandparents, busy schedules, chronic illnesses, etc. makes it more challenging for grandparents and grandchildren to be physically present in one another's life events. As a result, grandparents may easily miss the life events of their grandchildren as they grow-up. This includes major life events such as first steps or words and school graduations, and also includes a host of more minor, yet important activities such as extra-curricular activities (e.g., sports practices, recitals, etc). The importance of such events is easily in the 'eye of beholder' – there are obvious major life events that grandparents like to see and there are also more

mundane activities that grandparents may equally hold dear and valuable.

Given this background, the goal of our research was to understand the activities and experiences that distance-separated grandparents and grandchildren want to share with each other from the perspective of parents and grandparents. In particular, we were interested in families with children aged 3 to 10 years old and not yet at the pre-teen stage of life. We chose this age range as children seems to have more interest in communicating with their grandparents at this point in time and they also face a great number of developmental stages.

To explore this space, we conducted a diary and interview study with 20 participants from different locations, demographics, and with diverse cultural backgrounds and family situations [1][2]. Half of the participants were grandparents of children between 3 and 10 years old, while the other half were the parents of children in this age range who were separated from their grandparents for a variety of reasons as mentioned earlier.

Sharing Life: Current and Desired Practices

Our results show that distance-separated grandparents and grandchildren like to share their real life experiences with each other as much as possible. This is also desired by the parents. However, they have different level of interest and concerns. We also found that current practices for sharing experiences is mainly limited to using video chat after an activity and talking about the experience. Despite this, our participants talked about wanting to participate in experiences in the moment so that they could share in the excitement.

More specifically, we found that grandchildren like their grandparents to see their new skills in-person, recent activities that they did, and share their real life events and the excitement with them

"[My daughter] had told me that she wanted to tell her grandmother that she had swam in the shallow end of the pool from one side to the other without help." - P18, Father

"My grandson told me that while they were at their farm, he was towed behind the tractor on ski and then he tried to drive the tractor." - P2, Grandparent, Grandchild Aged 6

On the other hand, all grandparents in our study felt that being separated by distance from their grandchildren weakened their emotional bond with their grandchildren as they missed major happenings in their grandchildren's lives and they wished they could share these moments together. Some of these happenings included life developments like a child's first time reading, first time writing, or tying one's shoelaces, while other events included special days - commensurate of major events in the life of a kid - such as birthdays, new years, the first day of kindergarten, school grade graduations, and sports competition. As a result, grandparents said they would appreciate any means of technology that helped them to be involved in these moments.

Some of the families in our study also experienced cultural differences for reasons such as immigration to new countries or having one parent from another culture or religion. As a result, participants talked about wanting to share cultural activities with remote

grandchildren. This was not always described as being simple and straightforward though. Parents told us that grandparents would need to carefully choose what to share while considering a child's age, their interest, and family background. Grandparents were concerned with overstepping their bounds because they did not want to annoy children or the parents.

"I really like [my daughter] to be able to celebrate New Year with my family and to see how they prepare for our new year because we have a lot of fascinating ceremonies that I would like my daughter know about them. She was surprised that her grandparents don't celebrate Christmas like us and she can not understand how they have different new year but honestly I don't like my parents to talk about our religious holiday with her" - P15, parent, child Aged 5

Many grandparents in our study also told us that they were self-conscious when talking to their grandchildren and did not want to annoy their grandchildren. Because of this concern, they preferred to share only a limited number of major events with their grandchildren such as travelling or fun cultural activities. Grandparents usually talked about their travels to new and interesting places with their grandchildren, as they knew this topic would engage children a lot.

Overall, our study showed that grandparents and grandchildren like to connect with one another to share their life experiences. Some of these may seem like mundane activities, but to grandparents and grandchildren who do not get to see each other very often in person, even everyday mundane 'stuff' can feel like major activities and life events. The lesson is that

the importance of such activities is in the 'eye of the beholder.'

Design Implications

Based on our study findings, we are now considering several design directions for connecting grandchildren and grandparents over distance to allow them to share cherished moments together. This builds on the existing design work in this area (e.g., [3]).

First, we are exploring the use of always-on video systems which enable two or more households to connect with each other. Such systems make it easy to share indoor activities that span long portions of time, such as birthday parties. These systems come with the somewhat obvious concerns around privacy. They are also limited because they have mostly been designed for sharing activities within the home only.

Second, we are exploring the use of mobile video streaming in contexts outside of the home. For example, we are interested in video streaming for grandchildren's outdoor activities like sports competitions or bike riding. We also imagine they may be useful for parents to share a child's school graduate, or various cultural events. Such systems require a reliable connection and easy, light and portable devices or wearable technology for the user to transmit the experience. They must also be designed specifically to be worn or used by children, parents, or grandparents with an easy means to control what the remote person sees.

Biography

Azadeh Forghani is a PhD student in the School of Interactive Arts + Technology at Simon Fraser University, Canada. She is investigating the communication needs and expectations of distance-separated grandparents, parents and grandchildren as well as the social challenges that might arise. This also includes the challenges in the design of communication systems for sharing life experiences and providing remote parental support.

Carman Neustaedter is an Assistant Professor in the School of Interactive Arts + Technology at Simon Fraser University, Canada. His research is in design, human computer Interaction, and domestic computing. Here he focuses on the design and use of technologies for connecting people who are separated by distance or time. This includes design for promoting family connectedness, support for workplace collaboration, and bringing people together through pervasive games. To learn more about his research group, the Connections Lab, visit <http://clab.iat.sfu.ca>

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