

FAMILY

When Your Kids Don't Have Kids

Are you yearning for grandchildren who may never arrive? Here's how you can learn to cope

BY JENNY ROUGH

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her children were young. She says it was “strong birth control” for impressionable minds: Her kids probably know better than many childless adults just how much work babies can be. Still, she admits, it’s discouraging to feel left out of grandparenthood.

LYNNE WISNER, 59, AND HER HUSBAND, Terry, 61, of Swartz Creek, Michigan, wonder if they’ll ever have grandkids. Their oldest child, a 39-year-old daughter, can’t have a baby because of health issues, and she hasn’t tried to adopt. Three younger kids, all in their 30s, remain single and childless. “I take partial responsibility,” Lynne jokes. That’s because she ran a day care center out of the home when

Like the Wisners, many parents 60 or older are waiting anxiously for grandkids, and some blame themselves for the seeming loss, says Marion Lindblad-Goldberg, Ph.D., a professor in the department of psychiatry of the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania. But they shouldn’t: “They need to recognize that society has changed,” she says. Women today have more options than they did a generation ago, and they don’t feel the same societal pressure to marry young and reproduce early and often. →

In fact, many young women may feel as if they are getting the opposite message: that they shouldn't settle down before they have established themselves in a career. U.S. birthrates are declining for younger women and climbing for women in their 40s, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. With rising cohabitation and divorce rates, "the nuclear family has become the alternative lifestyle," Lindblad-Goldberg adds.

If you don't have grandkids, you may feel as if your family has been derailed. Experts offer these strategies for coming to terms with a childless child.

>Give it time

Just because you feel overdue for grandchildren doesn't mean you'll never have them. Fertility treatments, adoption, and stepchildren from new



Feeling overdue for grandchildren doesn't mean you'll never have them. You could end up a grandparent in a way you never expected.

marriages (either your child's or your own) may land you grandchildren through ways you didn't expect, says Adam Davey, Ph.D., a developmental psychologist and associate professor in the department of public health at Temple University in Philadelphia.

Your adult children may wish to pursue higher education, may be

looking for the "perfect" mate, may be juggling the competing demands of dual careers, or may be delaying parenthood because they feel too unsettled or can't afford a child right now. Or they could be privately dealing with fertility issues. Navigating all that takes time. On the positive side, says Davey, we are living longer: Your

children can delay parenthood longer than you did and still be able to raise their own kids, and you, as a grandparent, will likely have time to watch them mature.

>Start talking

Although you may be hesitant to ask about your children's intentions to build a family, open communication is allowed, says Linda D. Applegarth, Ed.D., director of psychological services at the Cohen/Perelman Center for Reproductive Medicine at New York-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell. She suggests initiating the conversation graciously: "We don't know what your plans are for having a family, but we want you to know we're here and we support you." Many couples struggling with fertility worry unnecessarily that their families wouldn't wholeheartedly embrace a nongenetic grandchild, whether adopted or conceived using sperm or egg donation. You can reassure your child about this. One exception is if your child has asked you not to raise the topic. "And never ask a question for which you aren't prepared to hear the answer," says Davey. "If you aren't ready to hear a child say that parenthood is not in their future, then you probably aren't ready to have that conversation."

If you do learn grandkids aren't in your future, you're entitled to feel sad—and communicating that without sounding critical is okay. Then, however, do what you can to move past it, so you can enjoy the family you have.

>Take them as they are

The Wisners decided not to put pressure on their four adult children to have babies. The couple recognize they can experience something unique. "We have the opportunity to spend time with our adult kids one-on-one," Lynne says. Watching her colleagues and friends, she has observed how relationship dynamics can change when kids enter the picture. So relax and

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appreciate the stage your children have grown into. “We have moved from a parenting role to one in which our kids are more like best friends,” Lynne adds.

> Define yourself in new ways

If being a grandparent is not in the cards, embrace your other identities, suggests Kate Ridinger Marosek, M.S.W., a Washington, D.C., therapist who counsels those struggling to conceive and their families. Join a salsa-dance or music-appreciation class, become involved in charity work, or travel to other parts of the world. Starting a new activity may mean foraging for new friendships. If you feel alienated by friends who can’t stop bragging about their grandkids, start gravitating toward people with whom you have other things to talk about.

> Be another kind of grandparent

Jacky Kernan, 69, of Port Dickinson, New York, says she’s surprised that neither of her adult children—a son, 42, and a daughter, 40—has yet married or had kids. But that hasn’t stopped Kernan from grandparenting in her own way. Her cousin’s son has two kids that she has fully embraced. “I couldn’t love them any more if they were my grandchildren,” she says. When her neighbor had quadruplets 17 years ago, Kernan helped take care of the babies two days a week.

Older people volunteer in pediatric units to walk and hold babies—an

invaluable gift to newborns, their worried parents, and hospitals alike. Other mentoring opportunities—such as tutoring, participating in the Foster Grandparents program (800-942-2677; seniorcorps.gov), or offering music lessons to public school kids whose programs are being cut—are great ways to become part of a child’s life. Many children don’t have grandparents around or don’t have the chance to glean the benefits of wisdom and life experience you can offer. Plus, you can give kids something many parents may be running low on: patience.

> Talk with a counselor or support group

If you can’t shake the emptiness inside and are mourning the loss of your family lineage, consider talking with a professional. “It will help you sort out your feelings,” Applegarth says. Therapy may feel awkward if you’re not used to the idea. In that case, seek out a spiritual counselor, rabbi, or minister.

Support groups are another option. While there are plenty available for adults without kids (whether by choice or not), there aren’t many for adults without grandkids. Start one yourself. Discussing the issue with others in similar circumstances can make your experience easier to bear. Realizing grandkids aren’t going to happen can hurt like hell, Kernan says, but it’s not your call: “Your children’s decision not to have children is their own personal business, just as it was yours to have children.” ■

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