



Ask An Angel...

Our *Ask An Angel* correspondent is Arlene Petersen, Life Care Navigation Specialist in the area of senior home care.

Q. Ten years ago, my son got married and soon after, his job took him to the east coast. Since then, he and his wife have blessed us with three wonderful grandchildren. The distance between us is measured more than just by miles. We hardly hear from my son, and my daughter-in-law keeps the family at arm's length from us. This just brings me and my husband so much sadness and I don't know what to do. We raised our family to be close knit, but now that just seems like a memory. How can I cultivate a relationship with my grandchildren?

A. Family is so important. It is the glue that holds many of us together. We raise and nurture our children to move out of the "nest", but we do so believing and hoping that the relationship will continue to be close as they grow into their own personhood. What are we to do when others influence those close family relationships? For your situation, you cannot change the dynamics your daughter-in-law chooses. You can only be accountable for your own interaction with her, your son, and your grandchildren. So how and where do you begin?

First, I suggest reaching out to your son and his wife with your desire to connect with your grandchildren. It's important to be respectful and kind. Discuss some of your ideas of how you'd like to reach out. If they give the ok, it's your turn to have fun.

So how can you create that environment of fun across the miles? Today's families are very tech oriented. In a sense, this forces us to learn how to live in their world as best we can. Think about how your grandchildren engage with you the best and then put together a plan.

We have come up with a few great ideas:

- If you are planning a visit, send a jar with pennies or coins that your grandchildren can count and use as a reminder about the number of days until your visit. You can substitute

cute stickers they can attach to a calendar, which is another way they can be involved in the “count down.”

- Create a Grandma’s Cozy package. This is a package containing all the things your grandchild will need if he or she is under the weather. For example, you could send a can of chicken noodle soup, a treasured book, crossword puzzles, a stuffed animal, etc.
- Create love notes by cutting out heart or animal shaped pieces of paper or and write on them the things you appreciate about your grandchild. Place all the hearts in an envelope and mail them to him or her.
- Make a “Tag, Your It” notebook. You can use a simple spiral notebook, journal or colored note paper that you write in and mail to your grandchildren. Write a paragraph in your letter or notebook and then have your grandchild write the next paragraph in his or her letter. You can collect all of the “notes” and make a book that you can give to them as a keepsake.
- A family history project is great for long distances. We call it the “Back in Time” book. You might pique their interest by sending a story illustrating a great story from your history. Don’t end the story, but leave a cliff hanger question at the end and ask your grandchildren what questions they have about the story. They can mail it back to you and you complete the story. Keep adding storied about other family members. This is a great way for you to keep your family history alive. Who knows? It can turn into a great research project!
- For the tech savvy, play internet games together like Jeopardy or Wheel of Fortune, both of which can be found at sony.com. Other games that can be found on the Internet and include golf, card games, chess, checkers, strategy games etc. If you have a smart phone, “Words with Friends” is a great on line word scramble game to play.
- Another idea we have is called the “Imagine That” book. This is where you and your grandchildren collaborate to write a series of fictional children's stories describing the adventures you would have had, if you would have grown up together.

More internet ideas:

- Did you know that American Greetings and Hallmark feature cards in which you can record your own message in your own voice? Hallmark sells “talking” holiday books in which you can record your voice reading the story.
- If you have a computer with a web cam, you can see your grandchildren across the miles through a free on-line service called Skype. My sister-in-law just started this with her

grandchildren who live in Vermont and she loves it! A camera on your computer is all you both need.

- Upload pictures from your childhood, your kids' childhoods, or current photos onto a digital photo frame. You can add multiple images to the frames and mail the picture frame to your family.
- Photos can also be shared on-line. There are many services out there and most are free. Your grandchildren can log on to the site and view your photos.
- Email is a common way to communicate with family. I have one family member who sends me jokes all the time. It keeps us connected in a quick and easy way.
- Social networking is big these days and seniors are the largest growing group joining Facebook, a free social networking site. Kids are on it, too, uploading pictures and sending short messages to one another about their daily goings on. I created a Facebook page so that I can communicate with my family members across the miles. It's fun to get a sneak peek into their days.
- Don't forget about texting. I certainly have to wear my glasses when I text someone, but it's not impossible and it is great for sending a quick "I Love You" message. It is not too hard to type a few x's and o's in my message!

One thing is certain, maintaining a relationship requires an investment of time. A friendship is easier to maintain when it is in our "backyard" so to speak. When it is a cross the miles, it takes an extra measure of time. That is time well spent and the value cannot be measured!

Have a question for our angel correspondent? You can send our angel an email to apetersen@visitingangels.com or send your question via mail to Ask An Angel, 65 Woodbury St., South Elgin, IL 60177.