



## **New Jewish Grandparents Network Findings: Grandparenting during COVID**

By Lee M. Hendler and David Raphael, with Karen Radkowsky

In the early fall, Jewish Grandparents Network president and co-founder, David Raphael (Zayde) and wife Jo (Bubbe) received a call from their Baltimore-based daughter and son-in-law. Physically and emotionally exhausted, they needed help with their three-year-old whose school was in Covid-19 shut down. Family (with dog) drove to Atlanta where, for a month, the team of four busy working professionals shared in daily childcare.

Meanwhile, in Baltimore, JGN president and co-founder Lee M. Hendler (Gromzy) works as co-educator with her daughter, homeschooling two of her grandchildren in her own home. "Gromzy School" followed summertime "Gromzy Camp".

Many of our friends and colleagues share similar stories. A recently retired vice president of a major university travels from North Carolina to Tennessee, where he and his wife serve as their family's remote learning support. A Jewish educator and his wife moved into a small apartment in Los Angeles while their daughter's family occupies their large home. A Jewish early childhood education expert and her husband, a cancer researcher, teach and care for their two youngest grandchildren every weekday morning.

Some parents have the support of *their* parents; others are going it alone. "Sixty-three percent of parents said they felt [they had lost emotional support during the pandemic](#). According to a study from Harvard's Graduate School of Education, 61 percent of parents [of 5, 6 and 7 year olds in Massachusetts](#) agreed or strongly

agreed that they felt ‘nervous, anxious, or on edge’ because of the pandemic.” (Jessica Grose, *The New York Times*, “The Pandemic Is a ‘Mental Health Crisis’ for Parents,” September 9, 2020).

The pandemic has revealed the crucial role grandparents play. In many families, grandparents have stepped up and stepped in to help exhausted parents with remote learning, everyday chores, and basic childcare.

There is, of course, another side of the Covid experience for grandparents. We hear of grandparents who have not seen their grandchildren since the start of the pandemic. Grandparents who have yet to meet grandchildren born in the last nine months. Their sense of loss is immeasurable:

- “We feel as if we missed the whole first year of his life!”
- “Because we cannot visit, my grandchildren are growing up as almost strangers to me and I to them.”
- “Since the pandemic started ... I feel like I'm going through the motions of being a grandmother.”

Since the onset of the pandemic, the Jewish Grandparents Network has gathered compelling anecdotal data about grandparents’ challenges, fears, and frustrations, as well as the shifting roles they are playing in their families. But we felt we needed quantitative data to assess current trends.

We developed a short grandparents’ survey, distributed on social media and by email. 291 people responded. While the survey lacks the high level of external validity of the 2019 [National Study of Jewish Grandparents](#) conducted by Karen Radkowsky of Impact:NPO, the results provide important insights into how the pandemic has impacted grandparents’ roles in their families.

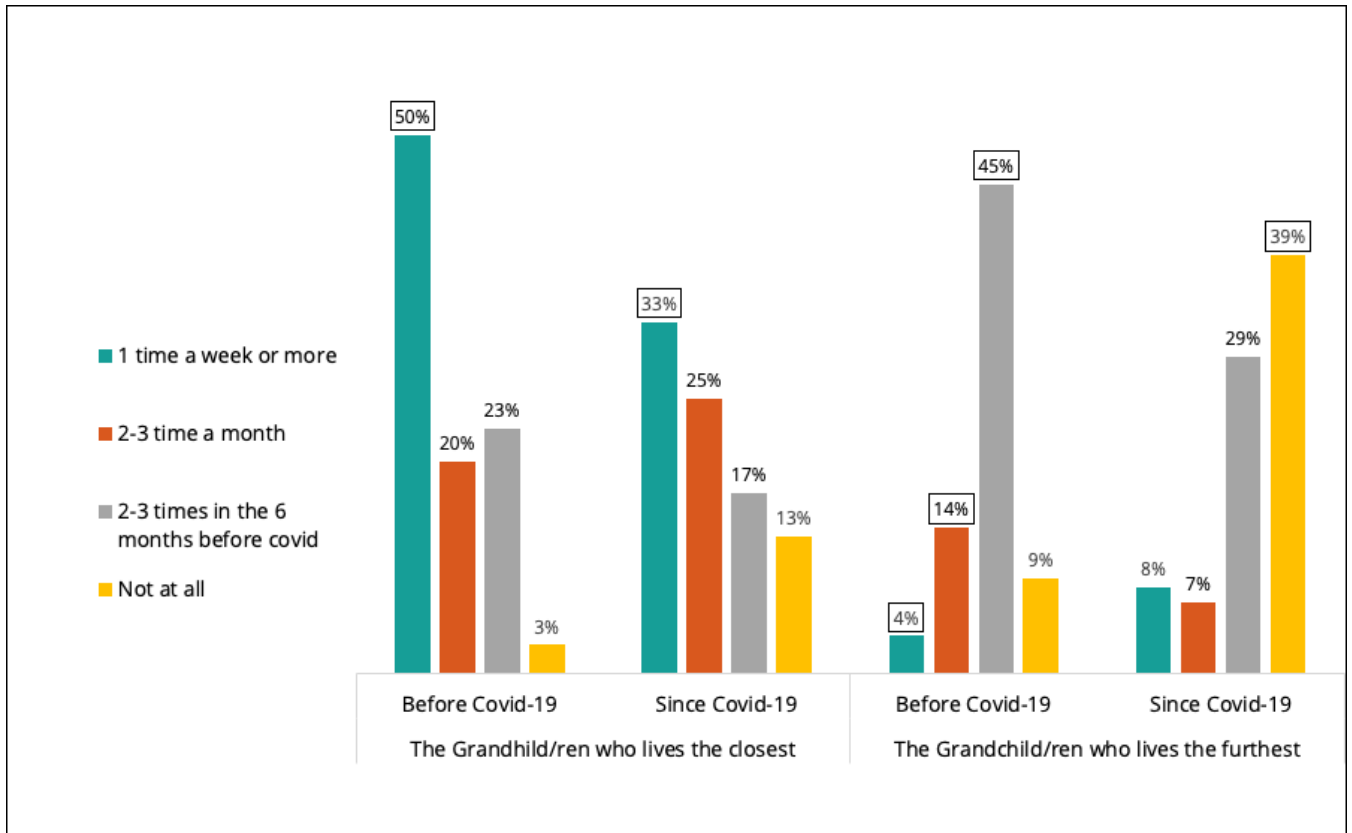
Below are examples of the essential data we sought:

We asked: **How often have you seen your grandchild who lives closest and furthest from you in the six months before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic compared to since?**

- 50% of respondents said they saw the grandchild who lives closest to them once a week or more in the six months before the onset of the pandemic. While this number was reduced, 33% were still seeing these grandchildren at least weekly since the pandemic began.

- 91% of grandparents had visited their grandchild who lives the furthest two to three times or more in the six months before the pandemic while close to 40% responded that they had *not* been with their grandchildren at all since the pandemic's onset.

### In-Person Visits

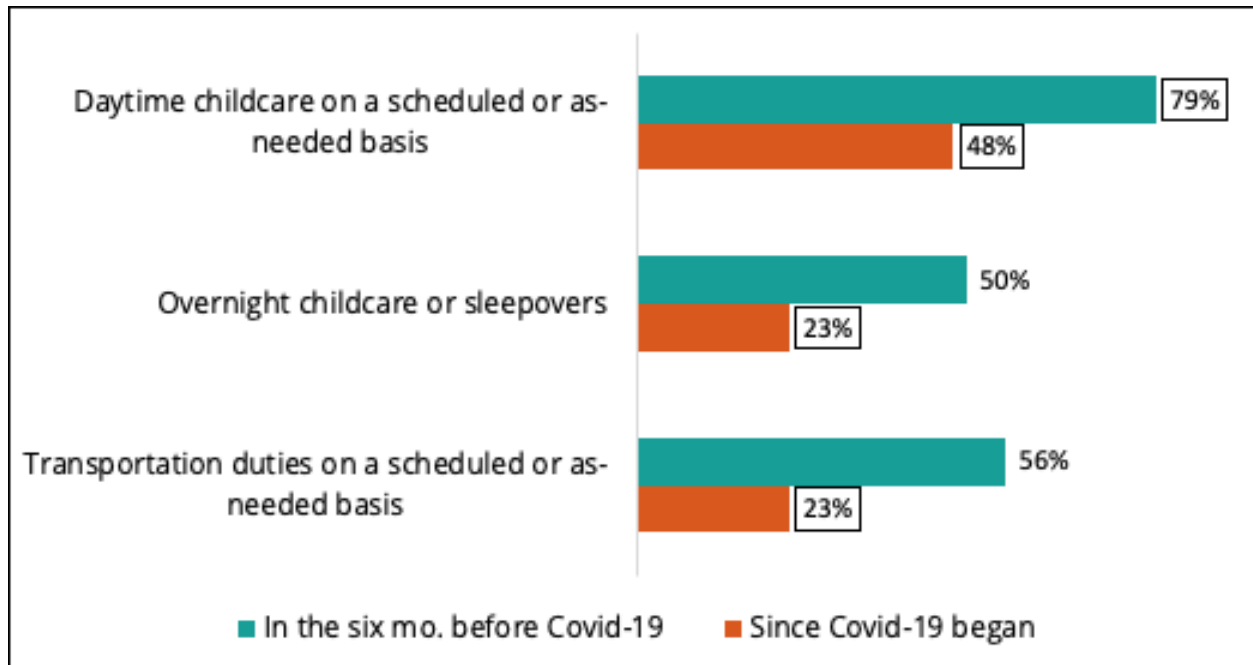


Data from the National Study of Jewish Grandparents revealed that grandparents play important supportive roles in the daily lives of their grandchildren and families.

- For instance, 73% of grandparents who lived within an hour of their grandchildren were providing one of the following on a regular or as-needed basis: childcare, sleepovers, or transportation services. This key finding made us want to better understand the pandemic impact on grandparent family involvement.
- In fact, the Covid-19 study confirmed a very high level of engagement (79%) in the six months before the pandemic when compared to the National Survey data (51%). While there was a significant drop-off in the level of

support during the pandemic, 48% of grandparent respondents continue to provide daytime childcare on a regular or as-needed basis and 23% are providing sleepovers and transportation services:

### Childcare and Other Services



In addition, grandparents reported that since the onset of the pandemic:

- 35% have assumed *additional* childcare responsibility for their grandchildren.
- 26% said that their children and grandchildren spent a week or more living at their home.
- 40% played a role in their grandchild's remote education program.

The survey's "tell-us-more" question was revealing:

- "It's exhausting. We went from assisting in childcare to being primary caregivers and school enablers during the workday."
- "We relocated temporarily from ... Michigan to Westchester NY to help with school and transportation .... We rented an apartment for a year."
- "My children and grandchild have been living in my home since ... March."
- "Since the pandemic began, we went to visit our grandchildren once. We rented a van, bought a travel toilet, slept two nights in the van at truck stops,

and had all our own food and water with us. It was a successful socially distant trip and gave us two weeks with our grandchildren.”

The Jewish Grandparents Network partnered with the [Blue Dove Foundation](#) to host two webinars, led by Dr. Betsy Stone and Dr. Ruth Nemzoff, on the emotional challenges and wellbeing during Covid. Videos are here: <https://jewishgrandparentsnetwork.org/video-library/>.

In a follow-up virtual town hall, participants broke into small groups to share their pandemic experiences. One group reconvened twice more.

The first conversation was filled with accounts of isolation, infection and quarantine, and changes in income.

However, in the second conversation, the tone shifted. Grandparents spoke of finding creative ways to connect — in-person and virtually. They made puppets, read stories, sent postcards and homemade gifts, and shared virtual holidays and birthday parties. One grandmother baked two challot and mailed them in time for Shabbat. The express postage was \$50.00.

The Covid-19 pandemic has exemplified and amplified the vital roles that many grandparents play. And it has highlighted grandparents’ need for guidance and recognition from our community. While many grandparents support, many grandparents also suffer.

At the Jewish Grandparents Network, we believe that this is the narrative of grandparenting today. Grandparents and their families face challenges during the pandemic and also, more broadly, in the context of today’s new and changing Jewish family. Grandparents need the wisdom, and collective support of our Jewish community.

Yet grandparents are also resilient and a remarkable resource for families — and our community at large. It is in this light that the Jewish Grandparents Network pursues its mission: “*Empowering Grandparents - Advancing Jewish Life*” and welcomes organizations and individuals to partner with us as we journey toward these goals.

*Lee M. Hendler and David Raphael are co-founders of the Jewish Grandparents Network where Lee serves as president and David as CEO. Karen Radkowsky is the founder and president of Impact:NPO and the researcher behind the first national study of Jewish grandparents in October 2019.*