

Long Distance Love is Tricky for Grandparents and Grandchildren

By Cathy Dausman



The Boren grandchildren enjoy being together on a recent trip to San Francisco with their grandparents. Photo submitted

If absence makes the heart grow fonder, some Lamorinda grandmothers must be developing the fondest hearts of all. These women are grandmothers with offspring who live miles, time zones and sometimes countries away from the East Bay. They are experts at long distance love.

Diana Graham is known as Grandma to her four grandchildren, but three of them might easily call her "Farmor." Along with a granddaughter who lives in El Cerrito, Graham has twin grandsons, age 4, and a granddaughter, 16-months-old, living in Linköping, Sweden. She catches up with her overseas family during weekly sessions of Skype, the video conferencing program, usually during their dinner-time, when it is breakfast time here. Visiting in person requires making a nine-hour time change, an 11-hour flight and a three-hour train ride to the Swedish city.

"It (Sweden) is a long way off, and it is hard for them (to travel here)" Graham says. So Graham makes the trip three times a year for 10-day visits, usually in late fall, early spring, and again in June when her husband joins her.

"If I could travel once a month to see my mother in Portland, I can do this," she said. Graham says her

overseas grandchildren are fluent in both English and Swedish so language is not a barrier. Her favorite activity is accompanying her grandchildren to a nearby farm with a playground, or watching them swim in a "wonderful indoor pool" or outdoor lake. In Sweden Mother's Day, or Mors Dag, falls on the last Sunday in May, so the timing is different, too. Fortunately, Graham says "I'm not big on holidays."

Patti Witalis' seven grandchildren, who range in age from toddlers to young teens, call her "Damma." The youngest two, both boys, live in Albany. Three more boys, ages seven to 10, are in Seattle. The oldest ones, a girl, 11, and boy, 13, live on the outskirts of London.

Witalis says Skype is a "wonderful" way to stay in touch despite the miles, especially when compared with how she remembers handling long-distance communications years ago, using a three minute egg timer to make telephone calls after 6 p.m. "I can show them our new house [and] our new dog," she said, all the while keeping tabs on what each child is "happy or hesitant about." She can watch grandchildren rehearse for a speech or show off a Halloween costume, too.

"It's just like being next door," she says. Witalis and her husband travel to Seattle two or three times a year; they'll make their fourth trip to London in July.

Erla Boren's grandchildren are also split near and far. The good news is the younger ones have recently relocated "much to our delight" two time zones closer, from Atlanta to Denver. Boren is "Amma" to her four grandchildren in deference to her Icelandic roots.

"We try to visit [her out of state daughter's family] three or four times a year," Boren said, adding "they also come here." Boren uses FaceTime to connect with her daughter's family, asking what kind of dress her young granddaughter might like to wear. "They are really such a joy," she says, "wanting to talk and show [me] everything. They are just a pure delight!"

Boren says she and her husband and their children work to "keep the family together," in spite of any distance between them. Her grandchildren have seen each other enough in their young lives that they are "crazy about each other," which, she adds is "such a joy for me". It's important to visit and keep in touch, Boren says, even by doing something as simple as mailing them a coloring book.

"I'm just making sure they don't forget me," she says.



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