

Gen X and Boomer Grandmothers: (Re)defining What It Means to Be a Grandmother



A new study looks at how Gen X and Boomer grandmothers are navigating the role for themselves and defining what it means to be a grandmother.

Thanks to shifting demographics and cultural expectations, grandmothers today are teachers, mentors, cultural historians, family storytellers, babysitters, friends, and so much more. Comparing Gen X (born 1961–1981) and Boomer (born 1946–1964) grandmothers shows how these women are (re)defining what it means to be a grandmother at their life stage.

Current Gen X grandmothers represent the younger grandmothers for their cohort. Although more Gen Xers will likely become grandparents in the future, current Gen X grandmothers have an average of age 40 the first time they became a grandparent. Gen X grandmothers have, on average, only two to three grandchildren. In contrast, Boomer grandmothers are more settled in their grandparenting role. The average age of first grandchild for Boomer women is 50, and they have more grandchildren—about 4 to 5, on average.

Boomer and Gen X grandmothers approach their roles differently.

The age of one's grandchildren and the amount of day-to-day interaction are key factors in the role and identity of grandmothers. Gen X grandmothers, many of whom are new to the grandparent role, are more likely to see their family roles based on their day-to-day activities, for example, as a taxi service, watchdog, babysitter, surrogate parent, and discipliner. In contrast, older Boomer grandmothers are much more likely to see themselves in family roles that honor their longevity, for example, as a source of wisdom; a conveyor of family legacy, culture, and history; and a valued elder. (See graph on next page.)

Average age of a grandmother is

50 at first grandchild for Boomer women and

40 at first grandchild for Gen X women

Boomer grandmothers forgo the traditional title of “grandma.”

Throughout their lives, Boomers have redefined traditional values. As Boomer women became grandmothers, this trend continued. While most grandmothers (70%) are referred to by the traditional name of “grandma” or “grandmother,” Boomer grandmothers are more likely to buck tradition and select names that reflect their personality, playfulness, or rebellious spirit. Boomer grandmothers are less likely than Gen X grandmothers to be referred to in traditional ways (63% vs. 77%).



The traditional references for Grandmothers

70% of grandmothers are known by traditional names like grandma and grandmother

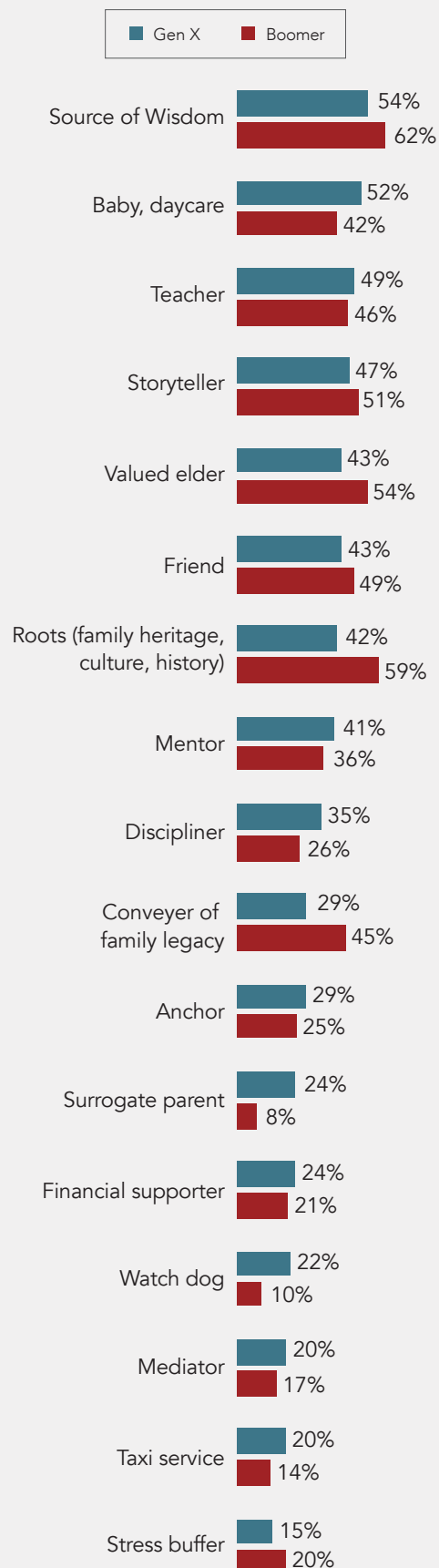
Many Gen X grandmothers are juggling the responsibilities of a multi-generational household.

Gen X grandmothers are intimately involved in the parenting part of grandparenting. Almost three times as many Gen X grandmothers (25%) as Boomer grandmothers (9%) live in multigenerational households with their grandchildren. The high cost-of-living and the rising expenses associated with childcare, which are particularly prominent in dense, urban settings, could be a factor encouraging multigenerational households among Gen X grandmothers. Forty-six percent (46%) of Gen X grandmothers live in an urban setting compared to only 27% of Boomer grandmothers. Over half (52%) of Gen X grandmothers see their role as providing childcare for their grandchildren, compared to 42% of Boomers.

For Gen X grandmothers, work can get in the way of cultivating in-person relationships.

The average age of a Gen X grandmother is 47, compared to a Boomer grandmother of 63. Boomer grandmothers are less likely to be working (43%), but three in four Gen X grandmothers are still in the workforce (73%). While both groups cite busy lives as a barrier to spending time with grandchildren, Gen X grandmothers are more likely than their Boomer counterparts to say that their own busy schedule is a barrier to spending time with their grandchildren (Gen X: 37%, Boomer: 18%). Boomer grandmothers, on the other hand, have more leisure time to dedicate to family. They are more likely than Gen X grandmothers to point to parents’ (Gen X: 13%, Boomer: 27%) or their grandchild’s busy schedule (Gen X: 25%, Boomer: 34%) as a barrier to seeing their grandchildren.

Self-Identified Grandmother Role by Generation



Although Boomer grandmothers are more likely to live more than 200 miles away from their closest grandchild (Gen X: 10%, Boomer: 21%), the fact that they have more free time makes them more likely than Gen X grandmothers to cultivate in-person activities with their grandchildren across a variety of interests.



The economic impact of Boomer and Gen X grandmothers on their grandchildren is substantial but nuanced.

In addition to time, grandmothers are willing to spend money on their grandchildren to have fun, give them an advantage, or provide a supportive buffer.



Average amount grandmothers spend annually on their grandchildren (or \$100 billion in total for all grandmothers)

These expenditures cover a variety of expenses such as groceries, allowances, rent, and vacations. Although Boomer grandmothers have more grandchildren, they only spend slightly more, on average, on their grandchildren than Gen X grandmothers.



Average spending amount on grandchildren



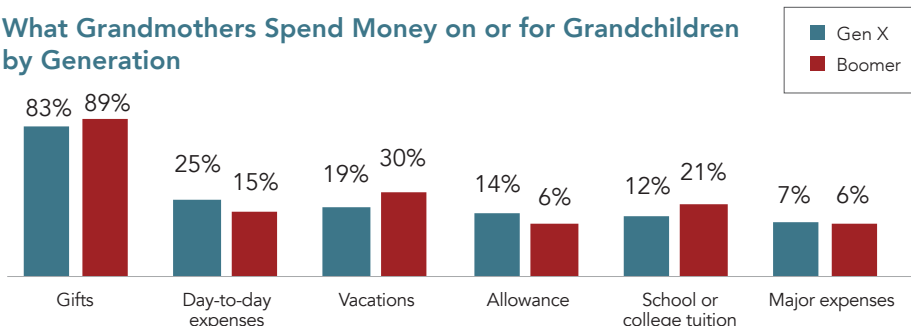
Gen X grandmothers
\$1,996



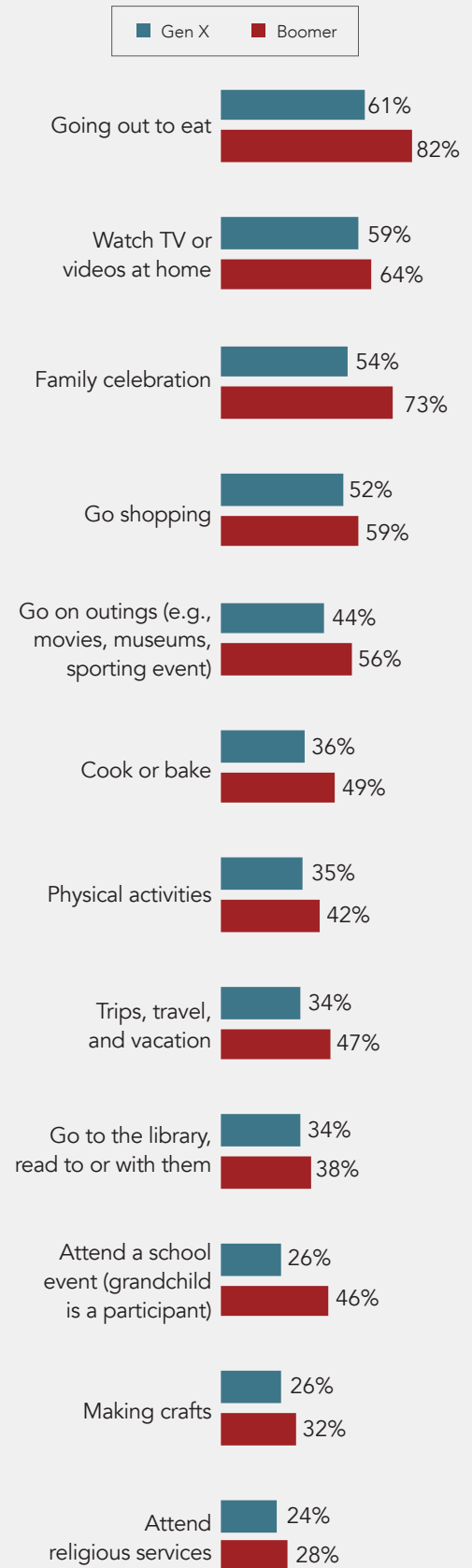
Boomer grandmothers
\$1,996

Nearly all Gen X (83%) and Boomer (89%) grandmothers buy gifts for their grandchildren. Travel spending is also big for Boomer grandmothers, and more Boomer grandmothers are covering school or college tuition than Gen X grandmothers, who are more likely to cover day-to-day expenses and allowances.

What Grandmothers Spend Money on or for Grandchildren by Generation

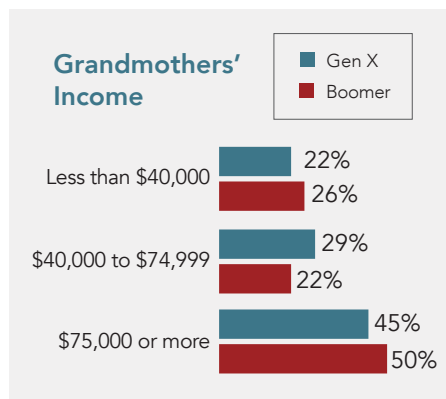


In-Person Activities With Grandchildren by Generation



About half of Boomer grandmothers have a household income of \$75,000 or more, which is considered high income. Only one in five (22%) Boomer grandmothers falls in the middle-class income range. In contrast, less than half of all Gen X grandmothers are considered high income and about one in three (29%) Gen X grandmothers are considered middle class with a household income of \$40,000 to \$74,999.

Young grandchildren bring lots of joy, hugs, and kisses but also practical, age-specific needs such as childcare, clothing for growth spurts, and diapers. Gen X grandmothers, many who have grandchildren under age 4 and fall within the financially squeezed middle class, are more likely than Boomer grandmothers to say they feel the financial burden of being a grandparent (Gen X: 33%, Boomer: 26%).



Grandmothers are discussing important life issues with grandchildren.

Gen X and Boomer grandmothers are comfortable giving advice on a variety of topics, from the benign, like social media, to the controversial, like racism and sexuality. Boomer grandmothers, who often serve as carriers of culture, roots, and knowledge for their older grandchildren, are more comfortable than their Gen X counterparts talking about social etiquette, morals, and values.

Gen X and Boomer grandmothers enjoy their role and think they're doing great.

Although Gen X and Boomer women have followed different cultural paths and timelines, they have now arrived at the same place: they're grandmothers, and they take their role seriously. Nearly all Gen X and Boomer grandmothers say that their role as grandmother is important in their family (Gen X: 90%, Boomer: 84%). Across generations, three in four think they're doing a good job at the "grandma thing" (Gen X: 78%, Boomer: 74%).



Implications

In today's fast-paced, ever-changing society, grandmothers serve as an important cornerstone in their families for all types of support — practical, social, and financial. Grandmothers of all ages continue to define and redefine the role that they play in their grandchildren's lives. As grandmothers live longer and start to have great-grandchildren, helping grandmas create ways to share their knowledge and to engage and connect with their grandchildren will become even more important.

Comfort Discussing Topics with Grandchildren

