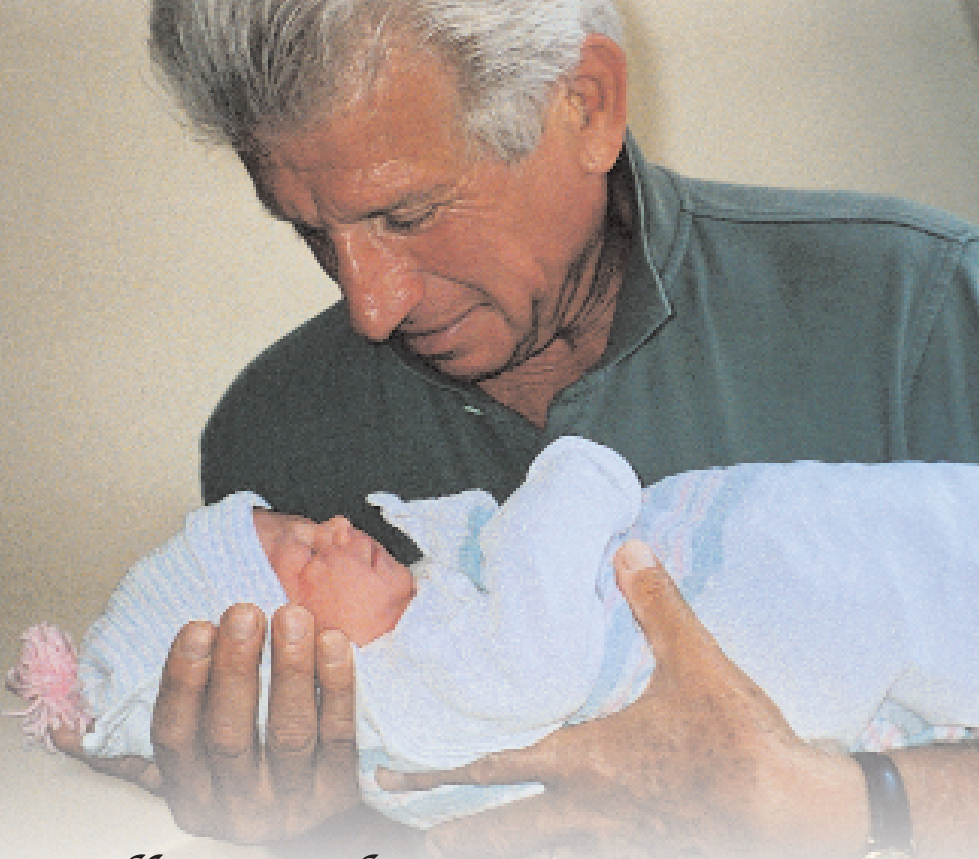


# On Becoming a Grandfather



## Reflections from an early childhood expert by David Elkind

*On July 22, at 7:00 a.m., we welcomed Lily Katherine Elkind into the world, and into our family. Two hours after she was born, I held her in my arms. It had been a long time since I had held a newborn. As I looked at this tiny being, my granddaughter, a great many things went through my mind. I thought of how different her birth environment was from that of her father, and in turn, how different his was from my own. I also wondered about her future, the world she would be growing up in, and the circumstances under which she might herself give birth. I also began to ponder my own double role as grandfather/child development professional. Lastly, I started to imagine, a bit selfishly I admit, all the fun my wife and I would have with her when she was left in our care for weekends and holidays.*

Now that Lily is 18 months old, I have had a chance to reflect more deeply on some of my initial thoughts. First, the generational comparisons. My son was present during Lily's birth, held his wife's hand, and even took pictures. I am sure this was a powerful experience for him.

When I watch him and his daughter together, I can see a bond that is extraordinarily rich and meaningful. In contrast, when my son was born, it was unheard of for me to be in the delivery room, much less to be taking pictures of the birthing. Lily was put right in her father's arms soon after her birth. In my case, I first saw my son in a glass enclosed room, lying in a crib alongside a row of other babies. I was not able to hold him until we took him home. This in turn was different from my own birth. I was born at home because my parents could not afford the hospital. What will birthing be like, I wonder, when Lily herself has children?

I am already getting some glimpses into the world Lily will be growing up in. Her father has created a web site for her which he periodically updates with new pictures. It is hard even to imagine some of the technological miracles she will bear witness to in her life time. More likely than not, there will be a cure for cancer and many other diseases. In all probability stem cell research will make it possible to regenerate the nervous system and to cure spinal cord injuries. Fuel cells and nuclear fusion will make possible new, cleaner forms of energy to replace fossil fuels. Education will look quite different once young people, who have grown up with information technology, predominate among the teaching faculty. But I have many fears as well. There will always be dissidents who engage in aimless killing of innocent citizens. We cannot eliminate terrorism, but we should do all that we can to eliminate the hopelessness and indignity that help foment it.

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I have also thought about my own role as grandparent/child expert. As I watch my son and daughter-in-law with their child, I am impressed by the love and care they shower on her. I was sympathetic to their anxiety about her crying during the first two months, and their fear that it was something they have done, or not done, that was making her unhappy. I was able to reassure them that she had just come into a strange new world, from a very quiet, warm, and contained one. It is natural, and entirely normal, for an infant to cry in response to entry into the buzzing, booming confusion of our world.

Now that she is older and has already learned that she can control her parents by crying, she is employing her new found power. At this point, I can assure them that if she is changed, fed, bathed, and comfortable, her crying is mainly attention getting, and that it will not hurt her to be left alone. When I say this, and she cries from her crib, I can see how hard it is for these new parents to let her cry. If I weren't there I am sure they would have rushed to her. Now she is crying less, and sleeping more.

These are minor issues, and they will be followed by others of more significance. So far I see my role as mainly giving information and support. I can reassure them about what is normative behavior, and that what Lily is doing is just about what she should be doing. In addition, I can help them see that, while Lily may be more advanced than the norm in some respects, she may be a bit behind in others. Norms are reference points, not laws.

They are loving parents and won't go too far astray. I am pleased to see that my son, who works in computer science, is not tempted to introduce her to technology. He was not hurried as a child and I don't think that either he or his wife are inclined to push Lily.

Nonetheless, when she gets older I am sure that there will times when we won't agree about child rearing practices. Yet I feel comfortable enough in our relationship to tell them so, and to give them the reasons for my position. But I also will listen to their arguments and accept their decisions. There are no absolutes in this profession or in life, and I could well be guilty of generational bias. I say this now; I hope I will say it when she is older.

Now for the fun part. While I am totally against hurrying, spoiling a grandchild is quite another matter. After all, that is what grandparents are for. She already has the book, *Make Way For Ducklings* and in a year or so we will take her to the Boston Garden to see the ducks themselves. We look forward to summers on Cape Cod when we can spend time with her at the beach, and I can take her sailing. My wife looks forward to dressing her up and taking her to tea at the Four Seasons. In the winter, I imagine reading to her in front of the fire with our little dachshund on one side and her on the other. And it is with great anticipation that we look forward to her opening her Hanukkah presents, as well as her gifts from Santa on Christmas morning.

I am really having a great time being a grandfather, and I have only been at it for 18 months.

David Elkind is a professor of child development at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts. He has written extensively and is perhaps best known for his popular books — *The Hurried Child*, *All Grown Up and No Place to Go*, and *Miseducation*. Professor Elkind is a past president of NAEYC. He currently is the co-host of the Lifetime television series *Kids These Days*.