

Grandparents and Jewish Identity

By the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies

[This post is part of series that takes a deeper look at some of the findings from the [Millennial Children of Intermarriage](#) report. The first installment looks at the relationship of children of intermarriage to their grandparents. We found that the relationship to Jewish grandparents can be extremely important for a child's later Jewish identity.]

Background: Our study draws on a sample of approximately 2,7000 respondents and in-depth interviews with 27 children of intermarriage in four cities. We compared children of intermarriage and children of inmarriage to identify which experiences and relationships are most likely to result in robust Jewish attitudes and practices in adulthood. The central finding of the study was that participation during college in Birthright Israel, campus groups such as Hillel and Chabad, and/or taking courses focusing on Jewish topics was life-changing in terms of respondents' Jewish engagement. At the same time, participation in Jewish life during college was related to childhood experiences.

As part of the study, survey respondents were asked open-ended questions about who had the greatest influence on their religious identities when they were growing up, and in what ways. About one-fifth of children of inmarriage and intermarriage mentioned grandparents as an important adult influence. We decided to look into this relationship further.

In interviews, children of intermarriage explained their relationship with their Jewish grandparents: My grandma was the real matriarch of my father's side of the family and she brought the whole family together and she would cook for all the major high holidays, so we were at Grandma and Grandpa's house a lot in the fall. (Female, 30, father Jewish)

I came to understand what Judaism meant through phone calls with my grandmother. That happened typically once every three months or so. (Male, 33, father Jewish)

When I was at my grandparents' [home], on my dad's side [Jewish] we would go to services on Fridays. (Female, 28, father Jewish)

In our survey, respondents were asked how close they were to their grandparents while growing up. For children of intermarriage, being very close to Jewish grandparents was an important predictor of a variety of Jewish attitudes and behaviors in young adulthood, including celebrating *Rosh Hashanah* and Passover, attending Jewish religious services, feeling connected to Israel, identifying as Jewish by religion, and believing it is important to marry someone Jewish, and raise Jewish children. This positive relationship between closeness to Jewish grandparents and Jewish attitudes and behaviors in young adulthood persisted even when we statistically controlled for childhood and college experiences and for the gender of the Jewish parent.

However, children of intermarriage – especially when the father was the Jewish parent – were less likely than their counterparts with two Jewish parents to have had a close relationship with Jewish grandparents while growing up.

Overall, it was more common to be very close to maternal grandparents than to paternal grandparents, and it was also more common to be very close to Jewish grandparents than to non-Jewish grandparents. These two phenomena work together to create a gap between children of inmarriage and children of intermarriage with regard to their closeness to Jewish grandparents. Children of inmarriage were more likely than children of intermarriage to be close to at least one set of grandparents, and thus more likely to be close to at least one set of Jewish grandparents. Similarly, children of intermarriage whose mothers were Jewish were more likely than children of intermarriage whose fathers were Jewish to be close to at least one set of grandparents, and more likely to be close to at least one set of Jewish grandparents.

In interviews, children of intermarriage with maternal grandmothers elaborated on the role they played in their lives:

It was really, really important for my grandmother [Jewish] that we be raised Jewish. It was just something that she felt very strongly about. (Male, 26, mother Jewish)

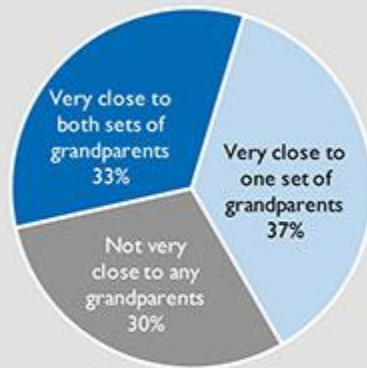
My extended family on both sides were more actively religious than my nuclear family so when grandma came over there was more of a Jewish feel to it. (Male, 25, mother Jewish)

Closeness to Jewish grandparents helps to explain some of the disparities in Jewish engagement in young adulthood between children of inmarriage and children of intermarriage, and also between children of intermarriage with Jewish mothers and children of intermarriage with Jewish fathers.

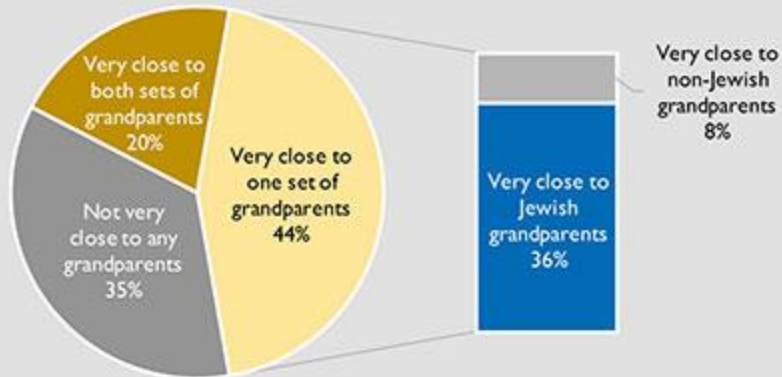
Policymakers should consider how we can leverage the influence of Jewish grandparents to increase the likelihood that children of intermarriage will have Jewish experiences when growing up. In addition, while unanswered by our study, the community should examine what role Jewish grandparents can play in supporting the Jewish journey of those who engage with Birthright Israel and other Jewish educational programs.

Figure 21. Closeness to grandparents

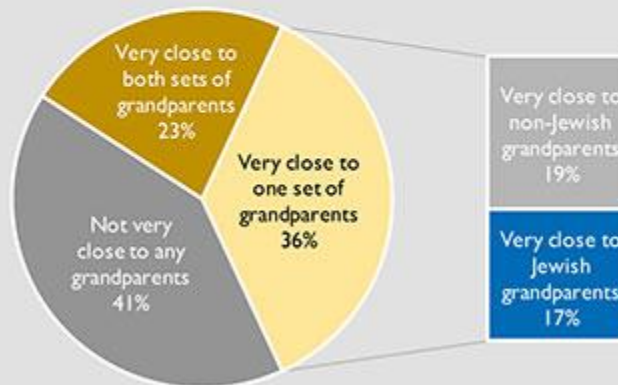
Children of inmarriage



Children of intermarriage, Mother Jewish



Children of intermarriage, Father Jewish



Cross-posted on the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies Blog

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