



Grandparent Technology

Becoming a grandparent is very much akin to being awarded a prize. You have no control over events that provide you with delight and satisfaction. It is conferred on both parents and both derive much from someone else's labors. In fact, most parents faced with a choice between a prestigious award or a lottery prize and the birth of a grandchild will take their grandchild any day.

In our case, Helen and I hit the jackpot twice inside five weeks at the end of 2002. At the end of October, our daughter-in-law, Carrie, gave birth to our first granddaughter, Genevieve, in Atlanta. Because our son Patrick was finishing up his PhD at Georgia Tech, they chose not to continue to rent near Tech. Instead Pat and Carrie and Jenny moved in with us. It was great! We had a granddaughter in the house 24/7. Five weeks later, at the beginning of December, our eldest daughter gave birth to our second granddaughter, Caroline David, on Long Island. We spent a bundle for plane tickets to Patchogue to visit her right after the birth and then for the christening a month later. This grandparenting thing was getting to be expensive! Especially when Jenny left us after Patrick joined the staff of the Night Vision Lab at Fort Belvoir in Virginia.

When we returned from helping Jenny's parents move to Woodbridge, VA, a plan to keep in touch with our far-flung grandchildren began to form. Pat and his family came back to Tech for his graduation (at the ceremony I got to put his doctoral hood on him, since his thesis advisor, Rick Trebino, was out of town). By then I had purchased two Apple iSight cameras and while Jenny was still in Atlanta we tried them out on Jenny using the Macs in our house. The solution was obvious: a new iBook fitted with a Wi-Fi card and an iSight camera was ordered before Jenny left to return to Virginia. And when Kathy and Caroline came down for a visit in May, we purchased the same rig for them.

The iSight camera is an ingenious device for a number of reasons. It is an autofocus camera with background noise cancellation whose image can be transmitted using high-speed (DSL for us) internet connections. The quality of the image is limited by the current bandwidth. On a bad day when the download speeds fall below 500 kb/s or so, the picture becomes somewhat blocky and the audio lag becomes noticeable. On a good DSL day, the picture is quite good and it is easy to converse since both the audio and video are sent in both directions simultaneously. The setup and acquisition of images rarely take more than two mouse clicks and a minute to accomplish.

The result is something approaching grandparent heaven. Twice a week we call our children to see if their Majesties have finished their supper or are not cranky or teething. If the young lady is receiving, we rush to Helen's iMac and set up a video chat. In about a minute, one of our granddaughters appears on the screen and we say our hellos. These days, as the babies approach 15 months, they recognize us and greet us in return. On their first birthdays, the laptop and camera were placed at one end of the table and we attended our granddaughters' parties.

If this seems like a bit of overindulgence by dotty grandparents, just wait until you have grandkids of your own. Beyond the satisfaction of seeing them, our grandchildren have regular contact with us. So when Jenny was down for Thanksgiving and when Caroline was down for Christmas, we were recognized immediately and the girls gave themselves over to an exploration of our house. In addition, the biweekly visits have allowed us to watch our grandchildren progress. We have watched them go from devoted crawlers to tentative walkers to experienced explorers. In place of the irregular parental telephone reports of yesteryear, we are there and we can applaud, encourage, and rejoice in our granddaughter's newest skills.

With the reports of the negative aspects of our modern technology, it is a pleasure to be able to use our computers and devices to be able to keep in touch with loved ones far away. I realize that to some this must seem like a promo for Apple, but this is not the purpose of this celebration of technology. Rather it is to give you some idea of this great advance in personal communication. Yes, you can use it for video teleconferencing. And I'm sure there are many technical and financial applications for this technology. But this touches hearts and minds and souls.

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Editor