

# Grandparents and their Grandchildren with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Building Bridges through Technology



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## INTRODUCTION

Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are neurodevelopmental disorders characterized by impaired social interactions, deficits in verbal and nonverbal communication, and repetitive behaviors or unusual or severely limited interests (American Psychiatric Association 2008). A child's autism diagnosis affects every member of the family. The resources that a grandparent can bring to the family of a child with ASD include emotional support to help the entire family cope successfully with the stresses of family, social and societal pressures, and instrumental support, providing needed hands-on assistance. The grandparent-grandchild relationship is an important one, described by Kornhaber (2004) as being second only in importance to the parent-child relationship. Interacting with grandchildren with ASD through technology may enhance communication, broaden social interaction and build closer intergenerational bonds.

## METHODS

- ❖ Convenience sample of grandparents whose grandchildren with ASD were participating in an innovative computer program, Sketch Up at the University of Utah.
- ❖ Two focus groups of grandparents were videotaped and transcribed.
- ❖ Transcriptions were coded individually by research team members then compared and discussed repeatedly to identify themes.
- ❖ Collectively, themes were summarized and synthesized.



## DISCUSSION

Many children with ASD excel at visual spatial skills, thus the 3D computer program, Sketch Up, played to this strength. These grandparents perceived that their grandsons with ASD experienced greater self-confidence, and enhanced communication and social interactions through participation in this Sketch Up program and the technological skills it afforded them. Interacting with grandchildren with ASD through a medium in which they are comfortable and confident could increase communication, broaden social interaction, and build closer intergenerational bonds. Focusing on grandchildren's strengths and not their weaknesses provided these grandparents a more positive future vision for their grandchildren with ASD.

## GOALS OF PRESENT STUDY

- ❖ Examine intergenerational relationships of families with a child with Autism Spectrum Disorders involved in Sketch Up workshops.
- ❖ Examine grandparents' perceptions of their grandchildren's involvement in the Sketch Up workshops.

## RESULTS

### Reframed expectations for their grandchild with ASD:

Grandparents experienced hope for the future for their grandchildren through friendships and computer skills developed in Sketch Up workshops:

"I've seen a great deal of confidence in him from the SketchUp™ workshops because he knew how to do this and this."

"I'm seeing a different child. I went to his program yesterday, the bell rang, and they went out to recess, and he had a little friend with him. He was playing around. That's unusual."

### The shared interests bridged gaps and extended interpersonal skills including communication and confidence:

Interacting with their grandchildren through this computer medium increased sharing time:

"Well as far as Sketch Up, he was showing me how to do it on the computer and he was, 'I'll show you Grandma, I can help you' and he did."

"I will call up and say, 'Steven, I need your help, I'm doing this' and he says, 'Grandma, all you have to do is this and this' and I say 'Steven don't go so fast, I can't keep up.'"

## CONCLUSIONS

- ❖ Technology, such as the SketchUp program may provide a unique pathway to enhancing intergenerational relationships and communication.
- ❖ Grandchildren with ASD may feel a sense of confidence and mastery in explaining and sharing their technological skills with their grandparents.
- ❖ Further research may verify how self-assurance could be transferred to other areas of the child's social life.

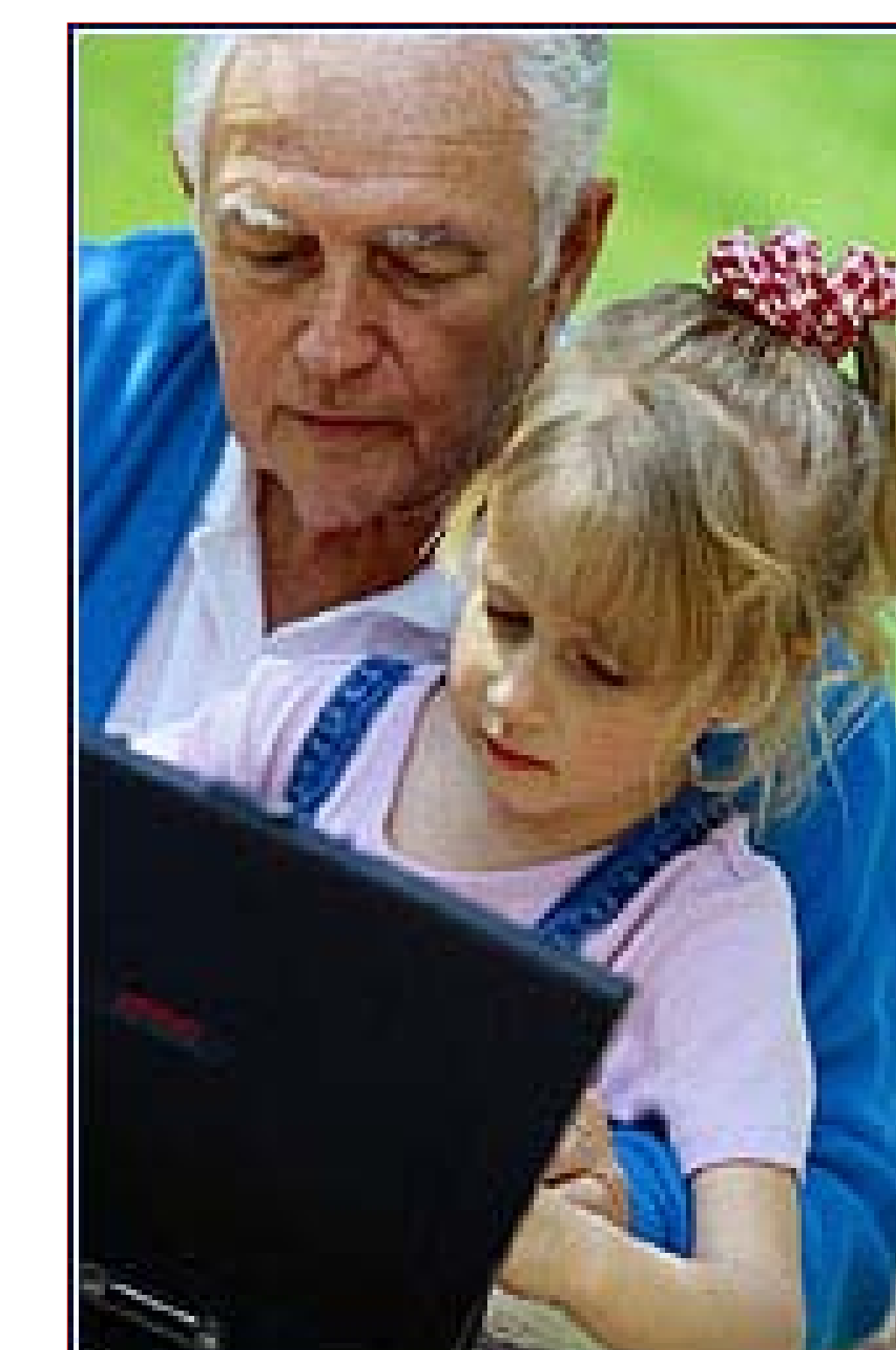


Google SketchUp  
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