Understanding Remote Communication between Grandparents and Grandchildren in Distributed Immigrant Families

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Grandparent-grandchild bonds hold high emotional importance and provide multi-fold benefits for both parties. In many **immigrant families, fostering these bonds can be extra difficult**, due to geographical, language, and cultural barriers. We **interviewed 6 distributed immigrant families** (F1-6; grandparent + grandchild + parent) to investigate the challenges and needs of immigrant grandparents and grandchildren during remote communication.

Communication Routine

Video calls was the main method of communication, with messaging and shared image folders as complement. Families **accommodated for grandparents' language skills** by using Chinese, but **conversation topics centred around** grandchildren. Grandparents viewed the content as less important than the **gesture of communication itself**, while parents and grandchildren often had higher hopes.

Language Barriers

Language restricts the fluency of communication. At best, children require help for specific phrases; at worst, children need constant translation when conversing.

Even when children can express themselves, they might use **unconventional phrasing** that's difficult to understand, for example saying "**growing longer** instead of **growing taller**" (F5, parent) when talking about their height.

Cultural Barriers

Culture limits the depth of communication. Lack of shared background also leads to **difficulties in initiating and maintaining the conversation**.

For example, when calling during mid-autumn festival, one grandchild struggles to think of anything to say since "**they never encountered something like a rabbit lantern** [...] it wouldn't cross their mind to bring up that topic" (F1, parent) and the conversation just ends.

Strategies

Parent scaffolding is common, though there are **concerns of over-reliance**. There is also a desire to **support children's long-term learning** – for example, through language schools or by using the heritage language at home.

Geographical Barriers

Geographical barriers act as catalyst, amplifying other challenges. During remote communication, **non-verbal cues and shared experiences are less accessible**. More immediate priorities may also cause communication to be delayed or deprioritized.

Design Guidelines

Address Language Barriers while Maintaining Authenticity. Create systems that can flexibly provide language support when most needed, while not impeding with the flow of conversation.

Asymmetrical Design to fit Diverging User Abilities. Tools should assign different roles and tasks to grandparents and grandchildren based on their technology literacy and learning speed.

Transitional Technology with Education as Long-Term Goal. Leverage everyday communication as opportunities for personalized learning to help children build skills for long-term needs.

The superficial nature of the remote communication between them [the grandparents and grandchildren], despite not being ideal, is the reality. – F4, parent

See Details