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Grandma's on the Computer Screen

By [AMY HARMON](#)

DEER PARK, N.Y. — Her grandfather wanted to play tea party, but Alexandra Geosits, 2½, insisted she had only apple juice. She held out a plastic cup, giggling as she waited to see if he would accept the substitute.

That they were a thousand miles apart, their weekly visit unfolding over computer screens in their respective homes, did not faze either one. Like many other grandchildren and grandparents who live far apart, Alex and Joe Geosits (pronounced GAY-sits), 69, have become fluent in the ways of the Web cam.

“Delicious,” Mr. Geosits exclaimed from Florida, pretending to take a sip from the cup, which remained clasped here in Alex’s small hand.

Video calling, long anticipated by science fiction, is filtering into everyday use. And two demographic groups not particularly known for being high-tech are among the earliest adopters.

In a way that even e-mailed photos never could, the Web cam promises to transcend both distance and the inability of toddlers to hold up their end of a phone conversation.

Some grandparent enthusiasts say this latest form of virtual communication makes the actual separation harder. Others are so sustained by Web cam visits with services like Skype and iChat that they visit less in person. And no one quite knows what it means to a generation of 2-year-olds to have slightly pixelated versions of their grandparents as regular fixtures in their lives.

But at a time when millions of people around the world are beginning to beam themselves across the ether, the Web cam adventures of the nursery school set and their grandparents offer a glimpse at what can be gained — and what may be lost — by almost-being there.

“We would be strangers to them if we didn’t have the Web cam,” said Susan Pierce, 61, of Shreveport, La., who will be a virtual attendee at Thanksgiving dinner with her grandchildren in Jersey City this year.

Over the last year, Ms. Pierce and her husband watched Dylan, 17 months, learn to walk and talk over the Web cam, and witnessed his 4-year-old sister Kelsie’s drawings of people evolve from indeterminate blobs to figures with arms and fingers and toes.

But the powerful illusion of physical proximity also sharpens their ache for the real thing. "You just wish you could reach out and cuddle them," said Ms. Pierce, a nursing professor. "Seeing them makes you miss them more."

Nearly half of American grandparents live more than 200 miles from at least one of their grandchildren, according to [AARP](#). Prof. Merril Silverstein, a sociologist at the [University of Southern California](#), has found that about two-thirds of grandchildren see one set of grandparents only a few times a year, if that.

But many grandparents find that the Web cam eases the transition during in-person visits, when grandchildren may refuse to sit on their laps or may reject their hugs because they do not recognize them. As one Web cam evangelist wrote on her blog, www.nanascorner.com: "You'll be able to pick up where you left off without those warming up to you, awkward moments."

On Ms. Pierce's most recent visit to New Jersey last month, for instance, Dylan called out the nickname he uses for her over the Web cam, "Buffy!" and jumped into her arms. "It melted my heart," Ms. Pierce said.

Urged on by strong word of mouth from fellow grandparents, they are often the ones to buy Web cams for their grandchildren (or, technically, their own adult children, who then have to plug them in). But the youngsters, who spend much of their time playing games of pretend, may shuttle more easily between the virtual and the real.

When Gail Hecox of Park City, Utah, shows her 2-year-old granddaughter Lily her cats over the Web cam, the child often pats the space on the ottoman next to the laptop and says "meow, meow," as though "it should be able to walk through the screen," Ms. Hecox said.

Many grandchildren play as their grandparents watch from afar, and when Coulter Medeiros, almost 3, of Cincinnati, wants to summon his grandmother in Massachusetts, he simply points to his parents' computer and says, "Nana on there."

Substitutions of retrograde technology are frowned on. If Nana is at work, without the Web cam-equipped computer she bought to visit with him, Coulter's mother, Elizabeth, sometimes puts her on speakerphone. "No Nana phone," Coulter says. "Nana on computer."

The adult children in a family have their own reasons for encouraging the Web cam enthusiasm of the younger and older generations. When Martha Rodenborn discovered that Elena, now 4, would sit happily in front of the computer in their Upper West Side apartment while her grandmother read her piles of picture books from Ohio, the Web cam quickly became a vehicle for remote baby-sitting.

"It was a lifesaver," said Ms. Rodenborn, who graduated from Columbia Law School last spring.

Because the Web cam connection is free, parents often keep it on as long as a grandparent is willing to make funny faces and animal sounds.

But for adult children pressed into service as real-time documentarians, the experience can also be taxing.

After Alex Geosits's virtual apple juice party with her grandparents on a recent Sunday, her father chased her upstairs, laptop in hand, as she went to get a favorite doll. Then he followed her around the living room as she played hide-and-seek and showed her bellybutton. Finally, it was her snack time, and he could relax.

The recent inclusion of Web cams in most laptops helps account for the 20 percent growth in video calling over the last year, said Rebecca Swensen, an analyst at the technology research firm IDC.

Internet companies are also promoting "video chat" as an enhancement to standard instant-messaging and Internet phone services. [Google](#), for instance, which makes money from the advertisements in its popular Gmail Web-based e-mail software, introduced video capability for Gmail this month.

About 20 million people around the world have made a video call for personal communication in the last month, Ms. Swensen said. American soldiers in Iraq beam themselves home over Web cams; parents on business trips (including President-elect [Barack Obama](#)) bid goodnight to their children, face-to-onscreen-face.

But grandparents and grandchildren are already working on ways to nudge the medium a little closer to actual teleportation.

When Deborah Lafferty, 55, and her granddaughter Natalie, 2, want to hug, for instance, Natalie comes to the screen in Seattle and squeezes her own face, just as her grandmother does to her when she visits from England. Ms. Lafferty, in turn, squeezes her face. "Grammy loves you so much," she says, echoing the phrase she uses in person.

Grandparents also use their own children as surrogates to close the tactile gap. Barbara Turner once sang her fussing newborn grandson to sleep from Ottawa, watching as her son rocked him in Indiana. She said she could almost feel the baby snuggling against her shoulder.

But last week Ms. Turner and her husband rushed to Indiana to be on hand for the birth of her second grandchild. "Some things you just can't do over the Web cam," she said. "You make the trip."

Still, some veterans of the technology fear that the video cam has started to substitute, rather than supplement, actual time together. Jennifer Ray, 24, of San Antonio, and her brother persuaded their parents to get a new computer so they could all video chat with their

respective toddlers on split screens from different states. Now the siblings commiserate about their mother's unwillingness to travel.

"She still comes," said Ms. Ray of her mother, Diane Heyman, who lives in Arizona. "But not nearly as often."

Ms. Heyman, 49, admitted: "It's probably true. You feel like you're actually seeing them and interacting with them, so it eases that longing."

Sherry Turkle, a psychologist at the [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#), worries that ever-more-real virtual encounters (holograms may be next) could make us forget what we are missing in the case of a grandchild: the smell of a grandmother's cooking, the warmth of an embrace. In interviews, older grandchildren who video chat with grandparents say they visit them less, feeling that they have already "seen" them.

"It's important that we not start to equate what the technology can deliver with what we can deliver to each other without the technology," Ms. Turkle said.

But the Web cam generation may already be recalibrating how much value to place on the sharing of real space with another person. Is it better for a grandchild to video chat twice a week and visit twice a year, or to visit four times a year? Perhaps, having built intimate relationships with them early on through the Web cam, they will choose both.

For now, when Jacob Mosier's mother, Ginny, of Las Vegas, tells him they are going to visit Mamaw and Grumpa, in Scottsdale, Ariz., the 2-year-old runs to the computer and waits happily for it to boot up.

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