

Power of love

Sally Kabak, who stepped out of retirement to raise a grandchild, talks about her book with **Sarah Lang**.

WHEN SALLY KABAK got a phone call saying her two-year-old granddaughter was in hospital after swallowing a camera battery, little did she know that the call would change her life. It would mean raising a toddler. It would mean moving back from the US, her home of 10 years, to New Zealand. It would mean kissing retirement goodbye. It would mean becoming a blogger and the author of a guidebook on raising grandchildren.

After that phone call from Child, Youth and Family (CYF) back in 2007, Sally and her American husband Norman flew to New Zealand to see the little girl they'd first met aged one. For three days, battery acid had been leaking into her stomach, causing agonising pain. Finally, her mother (Sally's daughter) took her to the doctor and she was admitted to hospital for an operation to remove the battery.

At a family conference called by CYF, Sally and Norman agreed to look after Lucy (not her real name) for six months while her mother got help. The transient single mum had left home at 16 and got caught up with a gang and drugs. When six months was up, and Lucy's mother's circumstances hadn't improved, Sally and Norman didn't hesitate for a second before volunteering to raise Lucy.

"I just knew it was the right thing to do," says Sally, now 64 and living in Wellington. "She was in need of care and protection, and I couldn't think of this wee one being put into foster care."

According to a local 2009 study, half of children who come to live with their grandparents suffer physical and psychological problems from past abuse or other ill-treatment, but 86 per cent make significant improvements under their grandparents' care. Thankfully, Lucy's worst physical problem was needing 14 fillings and she showed

no signs of any psychological problems. The worst it got was Lucy screaming and blocking the door when Sally occasionally left her with Norman, but she settled down when Sally promised to come back. "She was worried I wouldn't."

Much had changed since Sally had raised her two kids in the 1970s and 80s. Still, hard as she looked, she couldn't find

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much comprehensive, up-to-date advice for grandparents bringing up kids. To plug that gap, she started the website www.raisinggrandchildren.net.nz in 2009 to share resources, tips and her own blog. "Amazingly, it just took off," she says. Others started posting, a support network sprung up, and in 2010 the site was named among the top 12 worldwide by grandparents' bible *Grand* magazine.

Because many grandparents prefer books to screens, this year Sally self-published her own book *Grandchildren, Our Hopes and Dreams: A Modern and Practical Guide to Raising Grandchildren*. Available from her website and online bookstores, it isn't long and isn't polished prose, but it is a useful manual with lots of advice, lists and chapters that include starting school, eating, exercise, homework, "I want syndrome", self-esteem, body image, internet use, drugs and alcohol, texting, bullying and fibbing.

Her top tips for grandparenting? Sticking to routines and boundaries, rewarding good behaviour but never the bad, and not sweating the small stuff. "Ask for help. Talk to whoever will listen. Take time out for yourself." Self-care is crucial, says Sally, whose energy levels have waned as she's aged. She finds tantrums or sulking particularly exhausting. "Sometimes I think 'I can't do this any more', but you've got to keep going."



She's also learnt to be firmer than she was with her own children. Take the time three-year-old Lucy kept refusing to get dressed. "To get the message across that clothes are needed to keep us warm, I took her outside into the street with no clothes on. She immediately decided getting dressed was a good idea, and there's never been a problem since."

What is a problem is money. Government allowances of just over \$10,000 a year to raise Lucy don't cover costs. "We're using our retirement savings to raise her," admits Sally, a former receptionist who's keen to earn a little extra as a magazine columnist or speaker. Qualifying for a pension next year will help, but right now the financial situation causes her great anxiety – as do fears that given her daughter's choices Lucy could also "go off the rails". "But I'm hopeful she'll be okay. She's an incredibly beautiful seven-year-old who is gentle, loving, funny and writes little notes saying how much she loves me. I adore her."

Sally hopes that one day she'll have a relationship with her daughter, and Lucy with her mother. Sally and Lucy, meanwhile, phone and visit Lucy's half-siblings in other cities. ■

Grandchildren, Our Hopes And Dreams by Sally Kabak, paperback RRP \$34.99, hardback RRP \$54.99.

