



Helen Ellis, M.A. - Bio

DistanceFamilies.com

author / researcher / anthropologist / distance grandparent

Promoter and encourager of empathy within Distance Families

Helen and her husband Clive are New Zealanders and Auckland has always been home. Their 30-plus-year-old second marriage created a blended family. They each brought to their union a son and daughter. Helen is younger than Clive and in the year of their wedding their children turned 21, 20, 5 and 3 years. They had no children together. There was little one could describe as conventional about their family.

These days their children are in their 50s and 30s and since early into their marriage the children have been on the move. One or other has lived for either months, years or permanently in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Sweden, U.S.A., Thailand, Democratic Republic of Congo, Senegal, South Sudan and Pakistan. Helen and Clive told their children “you can do anything”, and that is exactly what they’ve done.



During the last few decades Helen’s working life has focused on business ownership and the travel industry. As a high school student, her sole ambition was to gain a position in this field, and she achieved that goal. Her appetite for faraway places was fuelled

through her work and has never waned. She is a planner and never happier than working on the intricacies of a complex travel itinerary.

A change of direction later in life saw her heading to university for the first time - mature student tentatively tackling a Bachelor of Arts undergraduate degree, majoring in Social Anthropology. She had to learn what Anthropology was! When she understood it was about how and where, people live and inhabit in relation to who and what is important to them, she knew this was her 'happy place'. Helen is naturally curious about how and why families do the things they do, and she is easily entertained at any airport, matching arriving passengers with their family and friends. She eyes them up and silently makes a volley of assumptions believing she has their whole 'package of life' nicely evaluated.

Towards the end of the degree she was tasked to imagine a topic for a possible master's thesis. At that stage, the word 'imagine' was certainly applicable. Her part-time studies had straddled many years, and she had absolutely no desire for university demands to dominate her ongoing life plans. However, when her professor showed such delight at her suggested topic of distance grandparenting, a seed was planted by the professor's comments of "so doable" and "a great idea".



Helen's initial research uncovered minimal New Zealand scholarship on the topic and little abroad. She soon realised that a gap in the literature was an appealing and potentially rewarding place in which to delve. She reflected that when her transnational family journey began, they were an oddity, but now they had many friends in the same situation. It felt like there was a story to tell, questions that needed to be asked and voices to be heard.

The question she asked her distance grandparent research participants was: "How is distance grandparenting for you?" Some responses were somewhat predictable, some were not. The process was an emotional rollercoaster and produced many worthwhile findings.

In tandem with the master's journey Helen had another plan. She decided she wanted to 'make a difference' for distance families in a way a master's thesis, filed away in an academic library vault, could never achieve. Thus was born a mainstream book series project. All the while Helen researched and wrote her distance grandparenting thesis, she was also thinking about the other generations, reflecting on how distance familying really is for sons, daughters and grandchildren.

Helen gave her research participants an opportunity to read a final thesis draft. It was this act that cemented her belief that a mainstream book (now books) needed to be written. Her participants were grateful for the opportunity to read others' experiences. It helped them weigh up their own worlds in a comforting way.

What Helen learned from this experience is that distance grandparents and their families have stories that need to be shared. Stories are intimate and personal: the way we make sense of our lives, actions, history and worlds. Her journey has delivered her a unique understanding of distance familying and she feels passionately that by sharing experiences of all generations, we will each grow in our understanding and empathy of each other's worlds.

A postscript to this story is that Helen's reward at the end of her master's was an overdue catch up trip to see their youngest grandsons and family in the United States. Little did she know that the world had other plans and that their U.S. visit, leaving late March 2020, would not happen thanks to COVID-19. Like all global distance families she wonders when borders will ever reopen and when she will be able to hug her distance family again. Now more than ever, distance families deserve a voice.

In 2021 Helen published the first of her book series: *Being a Distance Grandparent - A Book for ALL Generations*.

Future publications:

Being a Distance Son or Daughter - a Book for ALL Generations - due 2021/22

Being a Distance Grandchild - A Book for ALL Generations - due 2021/22

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