

# 'I don't know how anyone could be so cruel': The heartbreak of being denied access to grandchildren

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Estranged grandparents speak to the JC on day of action to highlight their plight



(Photo: Getty Images)

It is painful for Londoner Alan and his wife Jane to observe friends and acquaintances enjoying quality time with their grandchildren.

Estranged from their son and his wife, it has been four years since they last saw their grandkids and they are among Jewish couples speaking out in the week of an action day focusing on the plight of those estranged from their grandchildren.

“When my son met his wife 12 years ago, everything was perfect, we were so happy,” Alan recalled. “We saw them every couple of weeks.”

It all changed suddenly when their daughter-in-law fell pregnant with her second child.

“My son told us they didn’t want us to have a relationship with their children anymore. He said it was his wife’s decision.

“We went to the *bris* of the second baby but weren’t allowed to see him [afterwards]. She has had two more children since then that we haven’t even seen. It has been four years.”

Stories such as Alan and Jane’s are not unusual, explained Lorraine Bushell, chair of the London Grandparents Group and action day organiser. Herself an alienated grandparent, she continues to lobby on the issue.

“We have to keep trying to urgently change this situation as we realise our grandchildren continue to miss out so much on a critical part of their family life which they have an absolute right to.”

Alan said his own situation “is not that extraordinary. It affects lots of people.

“We still get to see our son but he can’t go against what his wife wants. We’ve asked her parents to intervene on our behalf but they don’t want to upset her.”

He and his wife are retired and in their 60s. They long to see their grandchildren grow up.

“We send birthday cards — it is all we can do. We have no idea if they get them.”

The action day is designed to raise awareness around the issue and to exert pressure on Parliament to improve rights for grandparents. They currently they have no legal right of access but, under the 1989 Children’s Act, can go to court to apply for contact.

However, Alan and Jane fear that if they did so, it would break up their son’s marriage.

“Our son is in a very difficult position. He is scared to say anything in case she turns on him and takes away his children.

“We used to be a very happy family. Now we just have this sadness.”

The couple — who attend the Jewish support group for those estranged from their grandchildren — sought help from their rabbi but found “he was not interested because it was a personal issue and he didn’t want to get involved”.

Another estranged grandparent is John, 86, who has not seen his grandchildren for 19 years.

“My daughter started to pull away from us,” he said. “She didn’t want to speak to me. I don’t know why. The last time I saw my grandchildren was at one of their barmitzvahs. They are grown up now.

“I have tried to email them — it is just a horrible situation. I don’t know how anyone can be so cruel.”

He thinks his daughter was pressurised by her husband to break ties because “he was jealous of how close we were. I adored my daughter — we came from a close family. Now it is broken.

“I don’t know how long I have left and I just want a relationship with my family. I have spoken to a rabbi about it but when I started to attend the same synagogue as my daughter she stopped going.”

In Eleanor’s case, contact with her granddaughter ended after the breakdown of her son’s marriage.

“They separated six months after her birth due to the violence of my son’s wife towards him,” she claimed.

“He just wanted to get away from her and not to take any action. But then she accused him of violence so that she could get legal aid and stop him seeing his child. She also accused me of shouting and screaming when I came to pick up my granddaughter.”

Eleanor said her former daughter-in-law used the courts to block all contact for both her and her son after the couple failed to reach agreement over custody.

“We spent a year fighting our cases. We were both cleared of any concerns or wrongdoing and my son was given back most of his contact at the recommendation of the court. But I remained suspended from all contact pending a full hearing.”

Eleanor was not entitled to legal aid and struggled to find a way to get in front of a judge to tell her story.

After contacting the Grandparents Association, she was helped to make an application for a Grandparent Contact Order.

In her case, there was a positive outcome, albeit after spending £3,000 in legal fees. “The judge recorded on the order that my reputation was clean and that the mother could never make such false allegations again.”

But although she now has regular contact with her granddaughter, “I missed a year of her life I will never get back.

“My son and I are very articulate and legally aware and were able to navigate through this minefield. However, most grandparents have to spend hard earned savings or just give up.”