

# How to Deal with Interfering Grandparents

## How to navigate the parent-grandparent relationship

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Parenting can often feel like trying to survive amid barely controlled chaos, so having a wise, experienced grandparent to help out can be lifesaving. But if that grandparent has trouble adhering to basic boundaries, it can feel as if the chaos has maddeningly multiplied.

When families expand, there is a significant shift in roles and responsibilities — one that is easy to make light of until conflicts emerge. Frustrating as these conflicts may be, it's important to keep in mind that lots of families experience them. Joanne Gottlieb, L.C.S.W., a New York-based licensed clinical social worker, cited religious practices, disciplinary styles, technology and diet as some of the most common areas for intergenerational parenting conflict.

“I would place ‘intrusive grandparents’ in the general category of challenges that adults and couples face in managing relationships with their respective families of origin, and with parents in particular,” she said. “This is a constant theme of therapy.”

So how to best navigate the convergence of these new roles so that everyone feels respected and valued?

- The moment you notice a negative pattern emerging, deal with it quickly. Don't wait until you are ready to tear your hair out to approach Mom or Mom-in-Law.
- Choose a time when everyone is calm to discuss conflicts — and remember that your parent or parent-in-law has your best interests at heart, and your child's too. Put the child's needs first — not your own.
- Bear in mind that child-rearing advice often changes from one generation to the next, so there are bound to be some ideas that a grandparent subscribes to — most likely ones that you were raised with — that you find outdated now.

It's vital to remember, in the thick of it, why grandparents' presence in your child's life is so crucial. “Grandparent love and knowledge is essential to a child's self-esteem and self-identity,” said Roslyn Hunter, L.C.S.W., a psychotherapist in New York. “They need to see themselves as part of something larger than their parents. They need to find their place and feel part of a family that has a history.”

To try to resolve conflicts, therapists suggest you should say what you need to say — clearly, respectfully and, if necessary, more than once. Meagan Hammerbacher, mom to a 3- and 5-year-

old, is committed to clear and consistent communication with her mother-in-law — even if it hasn't yielded the desired results just yet.

“I have asked my mother-in-law multiple times to please refrain from giving my children sweet treats and sugary drinks, and to consider the food that she generally feeds my children. Sadly, she rarely listens to my requests,” she said. Enlisting her husband to join the discussion was difficult at first, but she encouraged him to attend a few therapy sessions to feel more comfortable about opposing his mother, and now they are on the same page.

Such harmony between partners is the ideal first step in approaching tough conversations with a parent or parent-in-law, but it has not led to harmony in this case. “In all honesty I do not see the situation being resolved because his mother is of a different era,” Hammerbacher said. “I have realized that she is never going to listen to me and follow my directive, and it is not worth the constant fight with my partner because he does not want to fight with his mother.”

Until she feels ready to re-approach this conversation, Hammerbacher has decided to back off: “The only other resolution is to teach my children about healthy eating so they can advocate for themselves,” she said. “It is more likely that she will listen to my children when they tell her ‘Grandma, that food is not good for me!’”

Other parents live with their frustrations for the sake of the overall relationship. For Tanya Copenhaver, 41, continual conversations with her mother about her 4-year-old have been stressful, but she has decided she can deal with the dynamic. “I often feel judged by my mother when it comes to my parenting,” she said. “I used to let these things really bother me, and often, I still find myself starting to defend myself.” But she has come to realize that her mother truly does have the best intentions, misguided as her efforts sometimes feel.

“Often I bite my tongue and remind myself she means well and loves my daughter dearly,” Copenhaver said. “And I remind myself that the benefits of having my mom so involved in our lives far outweighs the frustration I feel.”

Grandparents find navigating this relationship tricky, too. Keesha Davis has strong opinions when it comes to her 1-year-old granddaughter, but over the course of her first year, she has intuited the best times to speak up and to remain silent. “I'm still adjusting ... I've learned to just be quiet, observe and chime in when I really think I should chime in,” she said. Recently she had a disagreement with her daughter and daughter-in-law about giving their daughter apple juice while babysitting. While the mothers stood firm — no juice — Davis told me that they are open to advice in other areas. “I think they're coming to terms with saying, ‘You know what, my mother is very logical when it comes to certain things,’” she said. “I've raised kids, I babysit kids. ... So, they do sit back and say, ‘Wait a minute. What she is saying is correct and we can benefit from listening.’”

Try to bear in mind that each generation has its own parenting beliefs, and parenting advice has changed over the years. Today's grandparents put their babies to sleep on their stomachs and used crib bumpers — practices that are no longer followed. Parental bans on corporal punishment can also be perplexing for grandparents, many of whom adhered to the “spare the rod” justification for spanking.

In these cases, making your stance crystal clear from the start is of utmost importance, Gottlieb said. “The parent needs to communicate clearly that physical discipline is not permitted,” she said. “If the parent is not sure that the grandparent, or any caregiver, will respect this wish, then I would advise that the parent not leave their child alone with that person.” Try to avoid long explanations or arguments; your rationale can be as short as a simple reminder that cultural norms have changed, so much so that a child’s mentioning in school that he was hit could prompt a call to child protective services.

“I would say that one of the frequent issues is cultural, particularly for immigrant families,” Hunter said. “Grandparents expect parents to follow cultural traditions from the old country. Parents often resist because old traditions are not practical for modern life.” In these cases, it’s important to avoid the instinct to be dismissive or overly critical of a practice that you may not understand. After all, your parent raised you. Talking through the reasons for your parenting decisions, and listening to grandparents talk about their own philosophies, may not lead to a quick solution, but it will help promote understanding and reduce discord.

Hunter reminds parents that they have the final word. “It’s important to remember that grandparents do not actually hold more power than the parent — even if the grandparent in question is providing some kind of support,” she said. If a parent asserting herself to advocate for her child jeopardizes the relationship with the grandparent, or vice versa, that is a different issue. “In either case the child’s needs are not being put first,” Hunter said. “The adult’s needs are being put first with the child being used as a tool.”

Parenting is a lifelong job; it doesn’t end when a child has entered adulthood. You are charged with creating a safe, nurturing environment for your child, as well as learning from the wisdom and, yes, missteps of your parents. A three-generation dynamic should feel fluid and mutually supportive, especially during times of conflict, experts stressed. Demonstrating positive examples of communication and compromise with a parent or parent-in-law will help your child navigate her own approach to problem solving, as these are skills that “make emotions and the world feel manageable,” Gottlieb added.

Finally, it always helps to take a deep breath and remember that your child has different needs from the other people in her life. Despite Tanya Copenhaver’s occasional misunderstandings with her mother, she is willing to turn a blind eye from time to time for the sake of offering her daughter a crucial childhood benefit: “Grandma’s house isn’t home, and grandparents get to have a different relationship with our children than we do,” she said. “When I’m not there, it’s O.K. if my daughter eats an extra candy or gets to eat applesauce, graham crackers and a marshmallow for lunch. Those are memories she will have forever.”

Remembering her own loving relationship with her grandmother, she added: “I can only hope that my daughter gets to experience that special bond with my mom.”