

The ABCs of Grandparenting

Becoming a grandparent changes everything. Coupled with incomparable joy is uncertainty about where you fit in. Your role -- not always appreciated by society -- is vitally important in shaping a grandchild's life. You and the parents want what's best for the child. But you discover you don't always share the same customs and language. You've entered their world, sometimes feeling like a foreign ambassador. What you need is a diplomatic guide.

Remember Who Is In Charge

Grandparents must remember that their children are the ones responsible for raising the grandkids. "There's a fine line between showing your interest, being involved, expressing your wishes and needs, and being just plain overbearing," says Susan V. Bosak, national chairwoman of the Legacy Project in Washington, D.C., which has online resources for grandparents, parents, and kids. She also conducts Grandparent Connection workshops. "There are bound to be things you'd do differently, but accept parents' decisions with a smile and grace."

With the arrival of a second grandchild in Denver four years ago, Andrea Gross and her husband, Irv Green, moved there from Asheville, N.C. at the request of their son and daughter-in-law. Gross tells WebMD, "I don't criticize. I had my turn to raise kids. This is my son's turn. Sometimes he drives me nuts, like rushing in if the kids can't entertain themselves more than 30 seconds and get bored. It's OK to be bored. But it's his turn. As long as I'm convinced that he and his wife would lie down in front of an oncoming train to keep those kids safe, which they would, that's all that matters."

What to Do When Expectations Meet Reality

Gross is a former kindergarten and first-grade teacher who was eager to teach her grandkids. "I adore those ages. I picked up different teaching things at Goodwill. I drove halfway across Denver and spent \$25 for a Judy Clock, where kids turn gears and learn to tell time." She eventually realized that her grandkids weren't around long enough or frequently enough for her to teach them effectively. What they wanted was for her to play games, color, and draw with them. "Teaching isn't my role anymore. Also, I used to buy educational toys instead of candy. Now I buy candy, and everybody is happier."

Tap In to Your Past

Remember your relationship with your parents and in-laws when you were a young parent? Those experiences provided lessons that can influence your grandparenting style for better or for worse. Maybe your mother had a habit of giving your child treats after you had said "no," and you've vowed that you will never challenge your daughter's authority in front of your grandchild. Smart decision. But what if your parents surprised your child with his first bike, and you do the same without knowing that your son thinks his child is too young for a bike? Ask questions first, before you assume that what you want for your grandchild is what his parents want.

Similarly, your relationship with your grandparents is likely to have been vastly different from what you want your grandchildren to experience. Today's grandma is more likely to go inline skating with grandkids than to bake cookies, and granddad might like video games better than fishing.

The years after World War II saw the scattering of extended families and the beginning of a new institution: the nuclear family. Mom and Dad were the be-all and end-all. "Forty years ago, grandparenting was viewed almost as a 'frill,' a role not essential to the functioning of the 'modern' family or the growth and development of children," says Bosak, author of *How To Build the Grandma Connection*. "Grandparents feared 'meddling' in their children's lives." She says today's families are under increasing stress, and grandparents are often the ones who save the day. "New research shows that grandparents are indeed significant in their grandchildren's lives, but there are no clearly defined expectations or roles. Grandparents increasingly play an important and often unrecognized role in the functioning of the modern family. Relationships are negotiated on a family-by-family, individual-by-individual basis." Consider yourself a 21st century pioneer.

Grandparents Shouldn't Have to Compete for Access to Grandkids

Personality, geography, and available time are just a few of the factors in the complicated matter of balancing grandparents' access to grandkids. "The tricky part is to make sure that all grandchildren know they are loved by all grandparents," says Bosak.

She describes a set of grandparents who felt excluded. They negotiated a new tradition with the parents. At nine years of age, each child would be eligible for a special two-week summer visit with the grandparents. "This became something all the children looked forward to, almost a 'coming of age' ritual that the grandparents helped guide the grandchildren through."

In another family, one set of grandparents resented the fact that the grandkids spent every summer at the cottage of the other grandparents. So they all sat down to talk. "The parents had recently divorced, and they decided the children needed the stability and memories of summers at the cottage," says Bosak. "It was agreed that the grandparents who felt left out would get the grandchildren during Christmas and Spring break for short excursions."

Spoil the Child

Spoiling grandchildren a little is a good thing, says Bosak. "Maybe you weren't able to spend as much time as you wanted with your children when they were young, and having grandchildren feels like a second chance. Children know that being with you is special, and they don't expect the rest of the world to treat them that way, so it's not really spoiling. It's the kind of positive attention that builds self-esteem and helps children resist peer pressure as they get older."

No One Can Exploit You Without Your Permission

Feel like you retired to a new career as babysitter? If you're putting your own life on hold and resenting every minute of it, the grandkids probably aren't seeing you at your best. It's time to talk with the parents. Better yet, talk about expectations before the child is born, says Bosak. "How involved do grandparents want to be? How involved do parents want the grandparents to be? See whether you can all start on the same page, and keep the lines of communication open as the grandchildren and relationships grow."

Gross rarely turns down an opportunity to babysit, but at the same time she is busy with her work as a personal historian. She and her husband own Legacy Prose, a service that turns personal narratives into memoirs in books and videos. "I've told my daughter-in-law that if there is an emergency, I'll drop anything because there's nothing more important to me than you and those kids. But if you'd just rather take one kid to the doctor and not drag the other one, I might say 'no.'"

Arthur Kornhaber, MD, is a psychiatrist, researcher, founder and president of The Foundation for Grandparenting in Ojai, Calif., and author of several books on intergenerational relationships. These include *The Grandparent Guide*, for grandparents, and *The Grandparent Solution*, for parents. On the foundation's web site, Kornhaber lists 20 questions to help grandparents understand and define their role. **Among these are seven questions regarding the indirect relationship you have with your grandchild as a result of supporting the parents:**

1. Have you talked with the parents about what kind of grandparent they would like for you to be for their child?
2. How you can be supportive of them?
3. Have you told them what kind of grandparent you would like to be?
4. Can you communicate openly and freely with them?
5. Can you listen to what they say with an open mind?
6. Are you making an effort to be up-to-date with parents and grandchildren, being familiar with the world they live in?
7. Is your advice well received?

These are questions that deserve to be revisited from time to time. Grandchildren get older, parents divorce, your financial situation changes -- multiple factors will affect the relationships, and your role will change based on your family's needs and your abilities.

Bosak says if there's one thing she would like to impress on parents and grandparents, it is, "If in doubt, listen. It takes empathy, skill, and self-control to listen well. Grandparents can take a leadership role in their family by demonstrating and modeling effective listening skills to deal with the inevitable family problems and differences in perspectives that come up. Don't rush in with advice, comments, or solutions, even if they seem obvious. Don't criticize, moralize, or psychoanalyze. Don't let emotion-laden words throw you. Focus your attention on the central ideas and feelings."

If building and sustaining these close relationships seem complicated, they are. But Bosak says it's all worthwhile, that intergenerational relationships are vitally important. "They make us feel connected not only to each other, but to something bigger, to the flow of life, to the past and to the future. You have to want to overcome the obstacles because you see that there is something bigger and more important at stake."

By Leanna Skarnulis

Courtesy: WebMD Feature