

putting the grand back in grandparents

Why (sometimes) our parents drive us bonkers once we have kids **writer: maria barrios**



They're not just your parents (or in-laws) anymore. They're now grandma and grandpa and they have an intensified vested interest in your life and that of your child. It's time to warm up to that idea, while also tackling any tensions that develop.

Once we "kids" have kids of our own, our relationship with our parents can change dramatically—often from the moment we bring our bundle of joy home from the hospital. Truth is, some of the things we now do as parents differ greatly from our parents' day, and can cause them to question us. Prepare yourself for questions like... "Why does the baby sleep on her back?" "Why does she not have three layers of blankets on her?" "When are you going to stop breastfeeding" or "Why aren't you breastfeeding" and "What the heck is 'tummy time?'" All of a sudden your personal childrearing decisions seem up for discussion.

Some grandparents go beyond the generation-gap babycare questions and can become quite, um, vocal or even critical about how you are raising your little one—and unsolicited advice can become commonplace. Julie* of Uptown simply ignores the criticisms of her parents and in-laws, but their comments irritate her nonetheless.

"Every time she says something [negative], it bothers me, because it makes me feel as though I'm doing something wrong."

Julie believes that her parents and in-laws simply can't put themselves in her and her husband's shoes. According to Julie, her mother-in-law believes that Julie should have quit work when she was seven months pregnant, as she did when she was pregnant with Julie's husband.

"I would have loved to quit my job, but we can't afford to live on just my husband's income. It seems that they remember their own experiences as parents and can't really remove themselves to see the new situation of being a parent today."

Kristy Brumfield, Ph.D., a clinical counselor with a special emphasis in early childhood play therapy and associate professor at Xavier University, believes that

these scenarios can be a good opportunity for parents to practice being on the same page.

"The husband and wife or parents of the child should speak to each other and come to a unified agreement on how to deal with the issue," says Brumfield. "Parents need to not be afraid to set boundaries with extended family members. But, at the same time it is important to remember the big picture and that you probably do want this person to be a part of your child's life. Take care not to damage the relationship—be respectful yet clear."

Sarah* of Gentilly faced an overbearing mother-in-law who stopped by the house daily and was consistently critical of her daughter-in-law's child-rearing approach.

"The day my daughter was born, my mother-in-law announced that she would be coming over every day to care for the baby because I didn't know anything," says Sarah. "I could do nothing right in her estimation, and she was not kind in her criticisms. It got to the point that I would not answer the door, or would deliberately leave the apartment after her work hours, knowing that she would be coming over."

Sarah's husband eventually confronted his mother, which helped to create clear boundaries and ground rules. While her mother-in-law was initially angry, the relationship between Sarah and her mother-in-law did eventually improve. Additionally, Sarah was happy that her husband stood up for her.

Brumfield states that while couples should pick their battles, it is important to address significant concerns in a timely manner.

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According to Brumfield, being direct early on is better.

“People can take advantage of one parent’s reluctance to address an issue. However, while issues should be addressed as soon as they come up, don’t be disheartened if time has lapsed,” says Brumfield. Late is better than never.

It is also important to realize that grandparents and other extended family members can also be in a tough position when it comes to confrontation, particularly when they see the child placed in an unhealthy circumstance. Margaret* of Uptown has witnessed her sister-in-law smoke throughout her pregnancy as well as isolate the child from her family while her husband served in Iraq.

“My nephew has poor nutrition and has lost all of his front teeth to bottle rot,” says Margaret. “He gets planted in front of the TV day and night and has yet to speak—he is three years old. We constantly struggle with how to handle my sister-in-law, how to suggest changes, etc. Nothing works. In the end, she’s his mom. We do what we can. It’s not ‘none of our business,’ but she is his mom, and my brother is his dad. Ultimately, it’s up to them.”

Brumfield agrees that while the ultimate decision is that of the parents, concerns can be expressed in a constructive manner. According to Brumfield, it is essential that the person doing the confronting not come across as attacking.

“That will just make the parents defensive,” says Brumfield. “Instead, take a more cooperative approach. If you acknowledge the parents as the final decision makers you have a better chance of being heard. However, if you believe it is a case of child

neglect, you should contact the appropriate authorities.”

Having a unified front between a couple will both aid in providing guidelines for the child and extended family members.

“As children grow older, having a united front between parents is more important,” says Brumfield. “They [the children] will recognize the parents’ points of disagreement and may use them to manipulate situations. Additionally, grandparents and extended family can also use weakness between a couple to manipulate. So, always keep a unified front and maintain open communication. It is better for all relationships, whether between parent and grandparent or child and parent.”

With both of her parents deceased and her in-laws in another country, one new mother, Gaby* of the Marigny, has a different vantage point on “interfering” grandparents.

“I would really love to have grandparents around for my daughter,” says Gaby. “Even though grandparents can probably be a nightmare and a pain—it comes from a place of caring and love. It is nice to have someone helping you do a better job. I don’t resent it when I hear people venting a great deal about their in-laws or parents being difficult or too pushy with their opinions on child rearing, but I think people should count their blessings.”

**names have been changed at the request of the interviewees.*

