



tools of the trade
for family improvement



by Heidi Kiebler-Brogan, M.A., LPC

OVER THE RIVER AND THRU THE WOODS TO GRANDMOTHER'S HOUSE WE GO

Parents vs. Grandparents Keeping the Balance

Holidays can be a wonderful and joyous time shared with many generations of family members. It can also be a very stress-filled season laced with arguments, tension and discord.

In older societies, grandparents were included in the extended family, if not in the actual household. Around 1950, young adults began a trend of moving away from their families of origin to establish their own families in distant locations. This meant many young children grew up far from their grandparents. However, as women began joining the workforce, the role of grandparents began to strengthen once again. Families are now turning to grandparents for help with childcare and the boundaries are shifting.

In many parts of the world, grandparents are regarded as the experts; in the US, however, new parents tend to refer to their doctors when they have questions or need validation because we are used to consulting professionals about our personal problems. We also assume that knowledge has advanced so quickly that our parents must certainly be “behind the times.”

So the question arises, how do we create our own new family, one that is truly ours, while encouraging the older generation to play their very important role? It is difficult to find a balance between two extremely different roles: being a parent to your children and a child to your parents.

Many of the couples that I work with express feelings of resentment towards their parents for what they perceive as their parents not supporting them in their choices, undermining their parenting efforts and disrespecting their wishes. On the other side of this coin, when I meet with grandparents, they frequently note feeling unappreciated and manipulated or controlled. I often hear: “Who does she think she is, telling me what I can and can’t do with/for my

grandchild?” or “She turned out okay, didn’t she?” It seems that both sides are simply looking for a little validation and respect, and if each could offer the other the support they need, the grandchildren would benefit tremendously.

In addition to deriving great pleasure from their grandchildren, grandparents can be a great help to young parents in so many ways. At the same time, some tension between parents and grandparents is normal. How we handle that tension when it arises is what determines whether we have a healthy relationship or not.

First and foremost, couples must communicate with and support one another within their relationship. If you and your spouse have not come to some mutual agreement on how you are raising your children, such as what the routine is (bedtimes, meals, play), what the rules are (and the consequences for each rule), and what your family value system or mission statement is, then stop right here and get to work. There is no point in working outside “your family” to establish boundaries and support until both parents are on the same page. Talk to each other and try to understand how your spouse feels about the situation. Remember “to understand” or “to empathize” is not the same as “to agree with.” Spouses can have different experiences and cultural views when entering a marriage. The difference becomes more pronounced as you bring children into your relationship, and you may need to discuss the role and input of grandparents. Once this has been done, you can begin to work on the extended family relationships and boundaries. Family is crucial to everyone,

so here are some tips for dealing with extended family:

Maintain contact throughout the year. Families that only gather on major holidays can feel like they are in a pressure cooker. Make frequent phone calls, visit, and send photos, emails, and cards. Schedule other gatherings - summertime BBQs, family reunions, picnics etc. - at less stressful times of the year to allow quality interaction between the generations. Distant family tend to feel left out or lonely. You can include them by having the kids send homemade gifts, or baked goods, make a video for them or an album. Send a piece of you to them.

Have the confidence to ask for help. Having confidence in your abilities as a parent makes it easier to ask for help when you need it. Most grandparents have the benefit of experience; they feel they have developed a good sense of judgment, they love their grandchildren endlessly, and they can't help but have opinions. When we can ask for help from our parents, it lets them know we value them and appreciate them and we truly stand to benefit from their guidance. If you find yourself being overly sensitive to criticism, you may want to look at your own inadequacies before assigning blame to your in-laws or parents. That being said, occasionally grandparents can create problems for families and it becomes necessary to establish boundaries. The welfare of your children and your nuclear family is of utmost importance and it is up to you to set the rules and guidelines.

Pick your battles. As parents, you do have the right to pick every battle, but it is much more worthwhile to pick a few things which are very important to you, and focus only on those. If you send your child to their grandparents with a detailed list of "do's and don'ts," "what's and when's," it is likely that when you walk out that door, that list will hit the trash, and they will simply do as they see fit. If, however, you give your parents/in-laws a few guidelines and stress that the guidelines are very important to you, they are more likely to respect your wishes.

Sometimes you must put your foot down. You are the parent and thereby the expert on your child. There are some issues too important to compromise simply to avoid controversy. Dietary and health issues, (such as not allowing children to have caffeine because they won't be able to sleep at night); exposure to inappropriate or violent material on TV or in video game form; and the proper use of safety devices such as car seats and seat belts are all issues that should be raised. You know your limits-don't be afraid to enforce them.

Let Love Excuse the Rest. If the issue isn't about safety or significant principles, don't react to it. When we react to grandma opening the door with a piece of candy in hand (after we've asked her 100 times not to give the children candy) it becomes fuel for a debate over parenting styles. Confronting grandma is only going to make her become defensive and lead to an argument (this is not a good idea in front of the kids).

Appreciate Their Intentions. Many grandparents comment on how they wish they could've enjoyed their own children as much as they are enjoying their grandchildren. Try to remember that even if your parents or in-laws are overindulging your children, they are doing it out of love. Maybe they didn't have the money or the time when you were a child, but now they wish to pour their attention onto your children. Appreciate the way they are trying to make your child's childhood memorable and special.

Be Flexible. You may never change your parents' controlling ways, but you can change the way you chose to deal with them. Laugh about the situation with friends (many are in the same boat as you), quietly continue to do things your own way, and always react with humor. Consider giving your family members a little more leeway as long as health, safety and your family's basic values are not endangered.

Grandparents also have the responsibility to foster an open, comfortable relationship. They can help the parents do a good job by showing confidence in their methods and accepting their choices as much as possible. This will encourage the parent to ask for advice when they are in doubt. Just because your grown children have chosen to raise their children differently, does not mean they are unsatisfied with the way you raised them. Be very careful not to personalize the actions of others too much.

During the holidays and throughout the year, it can be as much of a challenge for adult children to deal with their parents as it is for parents to deal with their adult children. Do not sacrifice a good relationship with each other because you feel the need to criticize. Do your best to appreciate the wonderful memories and feelings each of you is contributing to your children's lives.

If, despite these suggestions, your situation remains difficult to manage, it is often helpful for the parents (and sometimes the grandparents) to consult a professional counselor. Working together as a couple, and as a family, can significantly improve the quality of life for everyone involved. In the end, though, the responsibility and the right to make decisions belong solely to the parents.

The purpose of this column is to provide you with some "tools" that can be used in a variety of households and situations. I encourage you to adapt what you have learned to meet your needs and the needs of your individual family. If you have any questions about this topic, or have a suggestion for another article please contact me: Heidi Kiebler-Brogan, M.A., Licensed Professional Counselor at I. E. Counseling 908-456-1871 or email me at hkbrogan@iecounseling.com.

