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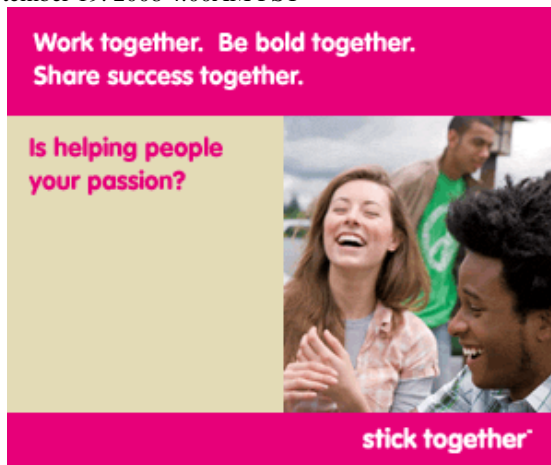
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## Battle of the grandparents

### Grandparents can play a crucial role in a family. But what happens when the two sets strike up a rivalry?

By [Alandra Johnson](#) / *The Bulletin*

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Grandparents are supposed to hand out treats and hugs to grandkids. They are supposed to lend parents a helping hand and offer sage advice. But parent-grandparent relationships are often a bit more complicated. Even the most loving, caring grandmothers and grandfathers can end up causing stress, and part of that stress can come from rivalry or jealousy that develops between the two sets of grandparents.

Some grandparents compete over how much time they get to spend with each child. Some worry about who gave the bigger gift, or who took the child on more extravagant adventures.

Many local parents and grandparents acknowledge that this kind of rivalry exists in their families. But talking about such problems, they feel, will only serve to cause more trouble.

As one local mom put it, if you're having issues with your in-laws, the last thing you want to do is have those problems appear in the newspaper for everyone to read.

Debbie Mandel, New York author of "Addicted to Stress," frequently hears about issues of grandparent rivalry from both parents and grandparents. Parents are tired of grandparents measuring and comparing every gift grandkids receive and every moment they spend with each set of grandparents. And Mandel hears from grandparents who feel pushed aside or left out and feel very possessive of their grandchildren.

"There's a lack of patience on both sides," said Mandel.

### **The problem**

Rivalry between grandparents is a hot topic right now, according to Loren Gelberg-Goff, a licensed clinical social worker in New Jersey.

She believes the jealousy stems from some grandparents' "inherent insecurities and uncertainties."

Another contributing factor is unstated and unrealistic expectations. She knows grandparents who think their strained relationships with their children won't affect their relationships with grandchildren. But that is not the case.

Many grandparents want to be "enmeshed" with their grandchildren. This is not healthy, according to Gelberg-Goff. "People need their boundaries, and boundaries have to be respected," she said.

With more families living farther apart and people having fewer children, the crunch for quality time with grandchildren has heightened in recent years.

Sometimes parents do favor one set of grandparents over another. It can be a case of proximity, with one set simply living closer than another and therefore able to be more involved. But sometimes parents may prefer the values and personalities of one set of grandparents. Gelberg-Goff hears parents concerned about grandparents who are too smothering, who discipline children too much, who don't offer youngsters anything to do or who are too permissive.

Personality conflicts that seemed tolerable between in-laws become more challenging when children are involved, according to Gelberg-Goff.

Grandparents, even if they don't always admit it, are "hungry for their grandchild to be more like their side (of the family)," said Mandel. There is a genetic possessiveness that comes with grandparents, she says. She hears grandparents say things like, "Why are you holding the child hostage?" She gets the distinct sense that some grandparents feel the grandchild is being raised just for them.

These feelings create more than just tension; they can result in depression and real sadness for grandparents, says Mandel.

### **Extreme situations**

If parents feel very uncomfortable with a grandparent's behavior or values, they can offer to have supervised visits. This can come up if, say, grandparents do not live in a safe environment or spank a child against parents' wishes. Sometimes differences are very serious.

"There are things you can't gloss over," said Mandel.

California resident Susan Hoffman, author of "Grandwishes: Advocating to Preserve the Grandparent Grandchild Bond," created a nonprofit that advocates on behalf of grandparents who have issues involving visiting their

grandchildren.

The organization was born from her personal experience. Her son gave up his paternal rights to his son, but for the boy's first five years, Hoffman saw him on a regular basis. Then, the boy's mother got married and wanted to erase the past, so Hoffman was cut out of the boy's life.

"Of course, I was devastated," she said.

She has worked with numerous grandparents in similar situations through her nonprofit and the support groups offered through the organization. She sees it as a growing social problem. "There's never any good reason to deny that love," said Hoffman.

Problems often develop after a divorce or death, or some kind of family crisis. The impact on grandparents can be tough. Hoffman says the stress is huge and can lead to sleeping issues, depression and sorrow. This is because grandparents see grandchildren as part of their future. Grandchildren represent a do-over, a "second chance to just play and offer unconditional love."

Every state has a different grandparent visitation law.

Hoffman's advice to grandparents is to do whatever they can to work out the situation. "Set your ego aside. Walk on eggshells. Keep your mouth shut. You do what the parents want you to do," she said. "You start pushing back, you end up not having anything."

### **Ideas for grandparents**

Gelberg-Goff asks her grandparent clients to think about the relationship they want to have with their grandchildren and about what they are willing to do to get it.

Often, clients agree they want a healthy, positive relationship, but offer a lot of "buts" about the challenges parents bring. Gelberg-Goff says grandparents need to recognize that they have zero control.

"A lot of time, your opinions do not have a place," she said.

Parents may choose religions or educational paths that differ from those of the grandparents. Gelberg-Goff has a message for grandparents bewildered and hurt by parents' choices: "It's not about you."

Regarding gift-giving, Gelberg-Goff suggests grandparents refrain from going overboard. In particular, they should not compare gifts. Ultimately, the gifts will not matter to the kids as much as time and love.

"It's not about the stuff; (that's) not who you are," said Gelberg-Goff. "Children know when they're loved and they know when they're not."

Mandel reminds grandparents that they are not in control and complaining about inequitable time only cuts down on their own special time.

Sometimes, too, grandparents and parents have different ideas about how their time with grandchildren should be spent. Mandel says parents today want children to be involved in enriching activities, whereas many grandparents raised their children to just "go play."

Another pitfall is grandparents who count too much on their relationship with little ones.

"You need to have a life and your own purpose," said Mandel. "Nobody should be the be-all and end-all for you."

Long-distance grandparents can try to stay connected in a variety of ways, according to Sue Johnson, author of "Grandloving," which she wrote with her daughter-in-law. This can help grandmothers and grandfathers focus on their relationship with the children and not worry as much about the grandparents who live in closer proximity.

Her book includes 200 activities long-distance grandparents can do, as well as tips for how to be a good visitor and other suggestions.

"Be aware there may be six or more grandparents involved. You can't expect to have (the grandchildren) all the time," said Johnson. "It's better to just try not to judge and be grateful for the time you have."

### **Ideas for parents**

Avoiding confrontation will not change a situation. That's a simple rule Gelberg-Goff offers parents. So talking about the problem is key. She thinks parents should first recognize where grandparents' rivalrous feelings originate.

"Most of the issues of jealousy come from a place of insecurity," said Gelberg-Goff. Grandparents are unsure of their place. She suggests people approach the topic by saying something like, "You have to know how much I love you and care about you, but when you say these things, I feel very hurt and it undermines our closeness."

Parents should try to remember grandparents are, for the most part, coming from a loving place when they state their opinions, according to Mandel. This means parents should listen, but don't have to agree. Further, parents shouldn't "plan on winning them over to your mind-set."

If a sensitive topic comes up, parents can try to deflect the conversation.

If you choose to address an issue in a family meeting with grandparents, Mandel suggests that the parent who is their son or daughter take the lead. "It's much easier to hear if it came from the son or daughter," she said.

Hearing that parents are choosing different values than theirs, grandparents can become defensive and sometimes jump to the conclusion, "Oh, I wasn't a good parent."

"You have to tread a little bit carefully," Mandel said.

Above all, parents should avoid gossiping or telling their children critical things about the grandparents.

Alandra Johnson can be reached at 541-617-7860 or at [ajohnson@bendbulletin.com](mailto:ajohnson@bendbulletin.com).