

# Resolving Differences with Grandparents / Extended Family

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There are some extended families that have easy perfect relationships and close involvement. There are some families where some members are so toxic that it is better to disconnect with them completely. But most family relationships fall somewhere between those two extremes. Here are tips for how to maximize the benefits and minimize the challenges of family relationships when you have a young child.

## **Most Common Issues**

- Different expectations for involvement: They're less involved than you'd hoped, and/or not helping in the way you'd hoped. For example, you hoped they would babysit based on your schedule – when *you* need them. Instead, they schedule times that work for *them*.
- Advice. They may offer advice that you feel is outdated, or that comes from a different perspective on parenting that's not in line with your values.
- Judgment. Whenever they make suggestions, it feels like they think that you're a bad parent.
- Failure to listen. It may seem they ignore your requests or do the opposite of what you ask.
- Spoiling. Our culture implies that indulgence is part of a grandparent's job. But when they say yes to things that you say no to, that can lead to more challenges for you as a parent.

These challenges can make it difficult to maintain a relationship. But there are good reasons to do so:

## **Benefits of grandparents / extended family**

In the midst of challenges, it's worth reminding yourself of potential upsides to their involvement:

- Love: Extended family may be able to offer unconditional love. They don't need to make the child do chores, or scold them for undone homework. Because they are not involved in the logistics of the child's everyday life, they may be able to accept and celebrate the child just as they are.
- Safety to explore and to separate: A family member's home may be the first place your child sleeps without you by their side. It lets them practice separation.
- Companionship: Grandparents *may* have time to slow down and just hang out with your child.
- Assistance: Some family members help out on a regular basis with child care and other tasks, some can't/won't do that but *are* available in times of crisis when you really need someone.
- Identity and history: Extended family can help a child feel more grounded in the world – offering a better sense of where they come from and what kind of person they may become.

## **Issue: Different expectations. Solution: Try to see things from each others' perspective**

If their involvement is different than you hoped, don't assume you know why. Talking with them may reveal a variety of reasons why their expectations of themselves and their role differs from yours:

- They may feel like they gave many years of their lives to parenting, and feel ready to take a break to do some of the other things they enjoy.
- They may want to be more involved, but have too many other commitments to make time.
- They may have anxiety about whether they can do a good job, and may hold back.
- They may be trying not to "step on your toes" and waiting to be invited to participate more.
- They may want to do more than you want them to do. Explain your views.

Have a clear discussion with them about how involved they would like to be / are able to be.

**Issue: Advice. Solution: Share What You Know / Believe, and Listen to what they Know**

- Talk with them about the parenting choices you are making, and your reasons for doing so.
- Arm them with current information: Share articles and websites. Invite them to pediatrician's appointments or parenting classes with you. Take a baby safety class together.
- *Ask* their advice from time to time. They may then give less unsolicited advice at other times. Listen to them: they've parented before... they may well have wisdom you can benefit from!
- Tell them what *to do* rather than what *not* to do. Help them feel important and included.

At some point, you may need to say: "Thank you for sharing your thoughts on this. But this is how we are choosing to parent our child, and we ask that you honor that and follow what we do."

**Issue: Judgment. Solution: Assume the Best**

Your parents can't help but remember you as a child who needed help learning how to use the potty, tie a shoe, walk to school, and learn to drive. It can be hard for parents to remember that you're a grown-up and trust you to find your own path. Assume that they want the best for your child, and if it seems like they are judging your choices, hopefully it's motivated by a desire to support and protect the child.

If they question your judgment or your rules *in front of the child* ("I don't know why your parents won't let you do this... I would let you do it"), let them know that's not acceptable. They need to show respect for you and help reinforce your authority, not diminish it. Tell them that if there's something that really concerns them, you would like them to talk to you about it out of the child's hearing.

**Issue: Failure to Listen. Solution: Adjust how you communicate**

Sometimes when we're not being heard, it can feel like we're speaking a different language. Try to see the world from their perspective and think about how you might say things differently so they can hear. When possible, listen to them, and show a willingness to compromise / meet them halfway.

**Issue: Spoiling / Over-Indulging. Solution: pick your battles, and enforce limits**

Pick your battles. Some of the less important things you can let slide. Maybe you have a no screen time policy at your house, but your family member likes watching children's shows with your child. It's OK if your extended family does some things differently than you do. For example, when your child goes to the grocery store with grandpa, he may always get candy from the gumball machine. When you go to the store, you can say no to that, letting him know that's grandpa's special treat.

But, if grandparents say yes to something that you feel strongly about (especially safety issues), then you may need to enforce limits. Make sure they know what are essential limits for you, so they can reinforce those as unbreakable rules. Talk about We more than Me. Instead of saying "You know I don't want that. You did it anyway. Why won't you listen?" focus on shared goals: "We both want what is best for this child. Can we talk about our mutual goals and how we can work together to achieve them?"

**Issue: Your Family vs. your partner's family. Solution: Ally with your partner**

You may find you get along fine with *your* family, but your in-laws make you crazy. Or vice versa! You may love the way one family interacts with your child but hate how the other family does. Talk with your partner first to figure out the challenges and goals, and then communicate with both families as a team.

**Sources:** <https://www.empoweringparents.com/article/grandparents-and-parents-disagreeing-11-tips-for-both-of-you;>  
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