

# How to be the perfect grandparent

• BATYA L. LUDMAN

**I**t's a shame that children don't come with an instruction manual, but then we'd need a different one for each child.

Having taught infant development to medical and graduate students, and being married to a pediatrician, I would have thought our background would have helped us to parent. Rather, it simply enabled us to make our mistakes with the greatest of authority, declare that our (mistaken) actions were based on long-established and well-researched truths!

As time went on, much of what we felt to be common knowledge with regard to how we raised our children has been tossed out the window by the current generation, and when we look at how we ourselves were raised by our parents, that too, often differed from how we raised our children. Somehow everyone survived, and when I think back to the pages of instructions I left for my mother-in-law when we went away for our first overnight, as if she had never looked after a child before, I now laugh. She, after all, raised three amazing children. I imagine how, after we departed, behind closed doors, she looked at my father-in-law, pretended to tear up the list and ran for the non-nutritious snacks I would never have allowed our first child to ingest.

Being a perfect grandparent is no easy task and, with absolutely no real-world "savta" experience of my own and no Grandparenting for Dummies manual, having already put my foot in my mouth once, I now proudly venture to describe some of the issues I think a new grandparent may face and the rules that go with them.

1. You may have much to offer, but you will need to learn when to speak and when to keep quiet as you "allow" your children to solve their own issues. You're there as consultant, and not the manager, giving advice only when asked. While it is easy to rush in with your many years of experience and expertise, prepare yourself for the possibility that your adult children may forget to ask your opinion, or worse, may not want your advice! Remember, it also took you a while to figure things out and become comfortable. It's their turn now and you want them to develop confidence.

2. Your children will have their way of doing things. It may differ from yours, but their way works for them. Think twice before commenting on how they feed or dress their child, deal with sleep and other challenges. They're the par-



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ents and they make the rules. It's your job to be sensitive to their needs. New beginnings are difficult. If you do feel strongly about needing to say something, find a way to say it delicately and with love.

3. When grandchildren are in your care, for the most part, your children should still set the rules. That said, if your children's values conflict with your house rules, find a way to openly discuss this together, otherwise, for example, you may not be happy when the grandkids toddle around your home with food.

4. Help teach the importance of routine and consistency. If you're invited to help out with bedtime, bath or feeding, don't be disruptive by overexciting the baby. Rather read a calm bedtime story and don't wear out your welcome.

5. Think carefully before you intervene or interfere. Don't ever get caught between your child and your grandchild, inadvertently sabotaging their relationship. You want to contribute to having your child's home being filled with love, peace and stability.

6. Let your children know what you are able to do and then do it with generosity and love. While at one time grandparents were more available, you may find that you work longer hours, and if you are retired, that you may have travel plans and outside interests of your own that you hope to pursue. Therefore, if you do have time, physical or other constraints and responsibilities, let your children know openly so no one feels hurt. Think about when you can babysit, pick up some groceries or just be there for moral support.

7. Ask your children what they need and what you can do to be helpful. Your children are exhausted, and under tremendous pressure as they try to balance family, work and social commitments. They have endless things to do and could benefit from a break and a date night for themselves. Make sure that what you'd like to offer is what they really want and need.

8. Love your grandchildren as much and as deeply as possible. You have so much to offer them that they cannot get from anyone else and both your experience and historical perspective enable you to be such a valuable participant in their life.

9. Check out the messages you inadvertently give through your body language, your words – both spoken and unspoken – and by your actions. Praise your children for their good parenting, and refrain from passing judgment. Sympathize with the difficult moments, be calm and be supportive.

10. Be honest and up-front with your children in a way that always keeps lines of communication open. This is a wonderful time, but one with many potential challenges as everyone takes on their new roles and responsibilities. Find a way to make it truly enjoyable for everyone.

While I did put my foot in my mouth and mistakenly asked about "my baby," I have been requested to make books for "their" new baby, because they liked all the ones I made when our children were young. I can't wait. For now I will promptly show this column to my children so they can remind me when I forget the rules. I might even suggest an evening out, and will smile when they give me their list of instructions including everything they think I need to know and don't.

Did I tell you the parents-to-be are both nurses – one in maternity and the other a paramedic and nurse in the emergency department? They do really know a thing or two. So, with all good intentions, even if I know how to do something easier or better, my job is to find the same roll of duct tape I used with their wedding planning, cut off a huge strip and apply it generously over my mouth! ■

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