

Marriage Recovery

What is the Role of Grandparents with Grandchildren?

It's not uncommon to find parents and grandparents living together with everyone minding the young. In some of these cases, care of the young can become a battle between parents and grandparents. It tends to work best when everyone knows his or her place and it is clear who is responsible for what.

For some families the choice for parents and grandparents to live together may be in order to provide financial or social support for parents or grandparents and sometimes both. Neither party may feel the situation is by choice, but it may be by necessity.

After a while the grandparents may overstep their bounds or feel the parents are inadequate. Parents may feel the grandparents are intrusive or worse, harsh or abusive. Having to rely on each other for financial reasons and sometimes a poor history between parents and grandparents may keep either from addressing concerns with each other. Both may be concerned that if they upset the applecart, all will lose something either financially or supportively. Over time tensions may escalate and the conflict may spill over into the care of the children. The children may learn to play parents and grandparents against each other when it is to the child's advantage. In other situations this arrangement may result in inappropriate care or mixed message care of the children by either parents or grandparents.

Parents should parent, grandparents should support at the discretion of the parents. Indeed even when parents are inadequate, when grandparents step in uninvited, problems and conflicts tend to escalate and the children suffer.

The challenge in these situations is to come up with a set of rules between parents and grandparents that clearly stipulate roles, responsibilities and acceptable child rearing practices. The major issue here is to learn to set and respect boundaries.

Families unable to negotiate a set of rules themselves are advised to meet with an experienced family counselor like myself. The role of the family

counselor is to understand and honor the family as a whole, including their living arrangements and then to help them arrange themselves so that it is clear who is responsible for what and what is acceptable with regard to the care of the children.

Families attend counseling for the good of the children and for their own continuity of care. Children need parents and grandparents to have clear boundaries so they can operate within the family rules too. Children find safety and security when family rules and boundaries are clear and this reflects in happier, better-behaved kids.

Setting good boundaries doesn't mean grandparents cannot have authority, but their authority is best delivered and observed when provided forthrightly by the parents. Where parents are struggling and grandparents can offer appropriate support it may be wise to accept it in the interest of the children. Similarly grandparents who have a tendency to overstep their bounds are cautioned because this behavior can bring distress to the family. The one thing neither parents or grandparents seem to want is conflict. This is often a good starting point for dialogue, with or without a family counselor.

When in Rome (your adult children's home), do what the Romans (your adult children as parents of your grandchildren) do. When the Romans (your adult children and grandchildren) visit, do what the Romans (your children as parents of your grandchildren) do. When the Romans (your adult children) are not present but your grandchildren are present then you may do what you do.

If you know a friend or an acquaintance that is having a problem with being grandparents along side their adult children or parents with children who are having trouble with their children's grandparents, tell them you know a family counselor with almost 50 years experience who they may talk with about the issue.

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