

# Navigating the Relationship with Your Adult Child

If you're a grandparent raising a grandchild, you already have a relationship with a parent of the child—one that can be tough to navigate.

Here's what to expect, and what you can do to make things easier.

## Accept that you'll have complicated feelings.

Grandparents who've undertaken the care of a grandchild may feel:

- ▶ Shock at the change in their future plans and lifestyle
- ▶ Guilt, shame, or embarrassment that their child cannot parent
- ▶ Grief over the loss of their role as a grandparent
- ▶ Ambivalence and resentment at this unexpected role
- ▶ Concern that they're betraying their child by assuming the care of their grandchild
- ▶ Love, relief, and joy that their grandchild is safe in their care

These feelings are normal.

## Know that your adult child also has complicated feelings.

They may be grateful for your help at times, angry that you've taken over their role as parent at other times. They may be absent, or present in ways that upset or confuse your grandchild. They may no longer be sure of their role in the family or their child's life and their relationship with you.

## Focus on collaborating to provide a loving, safe, consistent environment for your grandchild.

- ▶ **Communicate clearly, respectfully, and constructively.** Pick a quiet time when nobody's rushed. Try to stay calm. Say what you need in a neutral way, without blame.
  1. Say what is happening: Kindergarten registration is next week.
  2. Say how it is affecting you: I'm worried we won't have all the paperwork we need.
  3. Make a specific request: Can you drop off their birth certificate today or tomorrow?
- ▶ **Get legal consent.** Grandparents and parents trying to work out custody arrangements often share the same fear: that the other party will deny them access to the child. A [Power of Attorney](#) gives you temporary authority to take actions on behalf of the child.
- ▶ **If your relationship allows, ask your grandchild's parent to talk to the child about your role.** Your grandchild may challenge your authority through words – “You're not the boss of me!” – or behavior. This is quite normal and can sometimes be a sign of the child's grief or longing for

“I was very depressed [before my grandkids joined my household]. I was already emotionally fractured. I couldn't understand my son's drug issues and where I'd failed as a parent... A grandparent support group saved my life. I didn't realize I was not the only one.”

– Adoptive parent of 7 grandchildren

their parent. It can also be a sign of your grandchild’s stage of development (toddler or teen). It may help if your grandchild’s parent explains what’s happening: “Your grandma is going to take care of you for a little while. We don’t know how long, but she loves you as much as I do. I want you to listen to her and do what she asks you to do.”

- ▶ **Share your grandchild’s life and your life as their caregiver.** Ask your adult child how they’d like to be involved in their child’s life. Send photos, schedule phone calls, invite them to events. They may intend to do more than they can manage. You may need to act as a buffer between them and your grandchild, consoling the child (without criticizing) if parents miss a planned event.
- ▶ **Set clear boundaries.** State your expectations (what’s okay and not okay) and how you’ll be treated— “no phone calls after 10 p.m.” or “I won’t answer texts with abusive language.” Groups like the [National Alliance on Mental Illness \(NAMI\)](#) or [Al-Anon](#) can help you.
- ▶ **Be the calm one.** Two people who are angry cannot have productive conversations. Figure out what you need to self-regulate in the moment – pause, take deep breaths, etc. For the long term, consider counseling or a group where you can find support from other grandparents.

Navigating a relationship with an adult child who’s struggling can be difficult. Sometimes, despite your best efforts, nothing works. Be sure to give yourself the same kindness you would give a friend— permission to make mistakes and try again tomorrow.

#### **Technical Assistance Tip for Professionals Working with Kinship/Grandfamilies:**

Portions of this resource were adapted from a presentation by Dr. Joseph Crumbley, a nationally renowned kinship expert with nearly 40 years of experience as a family therapist, trainer, and consultant. Dr. Crumbley is a subject matter expert for the Network. For more information, see <https://www.gksnetwork.org/events/co-parenting> and <https://www.drcrumbley.com>.

The Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network: A National Technical Assistance Center (Network) helps government agencies and nonprofits in states, tribes, and territories work across jurisdictional and systemic boundaries to improve supports and services for families in which grandparents, other relatives, or close family friends are raising children whose parents are unable to do so. For more information, please visit [www.GKSNetwork.org](http://www.GKSNetwork.org).

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