



by Karen Stephens

Grandparents Are Not All Created Equal

I often sing grandparents' praises. Most fulfill their unique mission with love and dignity. But not all grandparents are created equal; some just aren't up to the job.

Life is stubborn in its cyclical certainties: an unfit parent is likely to be an unfit grandparent. But not always; I've seen exceptions. Maturity, age, and life experiences can teach one to be patient and compassionate with little ones. But generally, age does little to change human character . . . no matter how much it changes physical appearance.

We do kids a disservice if we stereotype all grandparents as sensitive, competent, emotionally stable, or even well-intentioned. Age alone doesn't magically turn someone into a trustworthy, ethical, and responsive person. And neither does the biological history recorded on the family tree.

Unless inadequate parents engage in years of honest self-reflection and they learn to treat children respectfully, they will most likely be inadequate — at best — grandparents. And so, despite popular perception, some grandparents aren't that grand.

Kids aren't fooled by manipulative, vindictive, or mean-spirited grandparents. They know when grandparents are two-faced and when they behave hatefully. But society prefers to push the unsightly offenses under the rug; it gets confusing to kids.

I've come to believe some grandparents don't deserve unlimited access to grandchildren. What a harsh thing to 'fess up to, but it's in response to real life.

Some parents have made the hard choice to keep grandparents at bay. They appear hard-hearted to others and often endure unsolicited guilt-trips. But it's unwise to condemn parents for decisions we don't understand. Deciding not to let a grandparent play a role in a child's life is arduous and gut-wrenching. But some parents do it with good reason. They are justifiably sheltering their children from potential harm.

Rather than blame parents, grandparents should be held accountable. Cold, unloving, or abusive grandparents can be harmful to grandkids, emotionally as well as physically. I've seen it. And children have confided in me.

I have a teenage friend. She does her best to avoid her grandfather. The problem: he expects a hug hello. That doesn't sound so offensive to me. A welcoming embrace from a lovely granddaughter isn't too much for a grandpa to ask for, is it? Well, no. But still, my friend dreads the hug.

You see, grandpa's idea of a hug is askew. He likes his hugs in private, when others aren't around. And his hugs end with both hands grabbing her fanny . . . and holding on. She has to push to get away. She vents to me — "It grosses me out and he just laughs. I mean, he's my GRANDFATHER?! How could he do that?"

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I wish I never had to see him again.” And then she says, “I don’t know, maybe I do something that makes him think it’s alright.”

It tears me up to hear her doubt herself, thinking that perhaps she’s the one with the problem. I ask why she doesn’t tell her mom or dad. But if you know kids, you know her answer. She doesn’t want to cause a family rift, doesn’t want to cause trouble. When I say there already is trouble, she says it’s just hers. She’s afraid if she speaks up, it would cause a split in family ties. And of course, she worries she wouldn’t be believed. She can hardly believe it herself; after all, he’s her GRANDFATHER.

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Guilt and self-doubt that rightfully belong to the grandfather instead burdens the grandchild. How unjust. But it’s a typical child reaction, especially for children who have been mistreated in some way. They blame themselves first, trying to deny that a revered family member would ever do anything immoral or unethical . . . especially to their own flesh and blood.

Sadly, my young friend longs to be comfortable with grandfather. After all, she loves him. But the relationship has become tainted and confusing. Losing emotional closeness to grandpa feels like abandonment; it’s isolating. And losing the ability to express affection through an innocent hug makes her feel jaded, skeptical, and depressed.

My friend has been betrayed by her grandfather’s weakness, poor judgment, and lack of self control. She’s missing out on what should be one of life’s finer relationships, and she knows it. It rings hollow in her heart, and it probably always will.

I’ve heard other stories of grandparents undeserving of the title. A friend’s parent abused several of his siblings when they were young. In childhood, the abuse was never confronted, never reported — as is the norm in American society. Today, these grown-up brothers and sisters have entered a covert pact to monitor the grandparent. They keep up the charade of a happy family, complete with holiday celebrations and vacations, but they maneuver to make sure the children are never — ever — left alone with the known abuser.

Can you imagine how exhausting that must be, to live with such a threatening subtext in your family? To always be looking over your shoulder, fearing your own parent could harm your kids? The parents are doing their best to give their kids a semblance of “real” grandparents, but I doubt authentic relationships will ever develop. Kids are perceptive; eventually they always sniff out a family’s secrets and emotional unrest.

Physical abuse is not the only fine line grandparents cross. As logic would dictate, grandparents can harbor all the weaknesses known to humans. The after effects of domestic violence boiled over into my office one morning. A mother was in tears as she dropped her child off for child care. She had just left her mother who in the heat of anger slapped her across the face. Bad enough in itself, but it was done in front of the grandkids. Needless to say, out of control grandparents don’t support kids, they scare them to death.

A friend of mine came to the hard decision to stop her daughter’s overnights with gram. In fact, she decided never to leave her child alone with her. The grandparent was furious. Relatives from afar called my friend and accused her of being cruel. What others didn’t know was that gram had been caught driving while intoxicated. She swore it was a one time thing. She wailed that the grandchild wasn’t even in the car anyway so what difference did it make. The

mother responded, “I could never forgive you if something happened to my child when she was with you. I won’t give it a chance to happen.”

That mother wasn’t being cruel; she was being conscientious, even courageous. After all, it’s hard to stand up to parents and endure their wrath, no matter what our age.

And so, while most grandparents are gifts from heaven, I know some aren’t worth their weight in salt. I hope that isn’t the case in your family. But if it is, think about inviting trustworthy, loving grandparent-substitutes into your child’s life. Grandparent stand-ins might be neighbors, friends, relatives, co-workers, or fellow faith community members. And yes, you’re right; they won’t be the “real thing” for your child. Perhaps they’ll be better.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.