

## Grandparents behaving badly

From inappropriate gifts to indulgent behavior, what's a parent to do?

By Melissa Schorr

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Katie Cannon still isn't sure what her mother-in-law was thinking.

When touring an art museum in Europe, she purchased a gift to mail back to her 8-month-old grandson, Rowan — a blue stuffed teddy bear with a rather prominent penis and testicles.

"I was shocked," says Cannon, 35, a Seattle-based multimedia producer for msnbc.com, who promptly shoved the bear back in its box and has dodged the issue since. "We're still not exactly sure what her intention was. I feel a little awkward asking at this point."

From inappropriate gifts to indulgent behavior, ask any group of moms and you'll be showered with stories of grandparents behaving badly. Whether it's a small indiscretion like flouting bedtime to more blatant infractions, such as whisking a baby off for an ear piercing — or even a baptism — without permission, parents are often left wondering what their own parents were thinking.

Elizabeth Thielke, 43, a Nashville, Tenn., mom of three who blogs about parenthood at busymom.net, remembers the time she and her husband returned late one night to her mother-in-law's condo after attending a 20th high school reunion, only to find her 2- and 4-year-olds still awake and running around the living room at 3 a.m.

"They all just kind of said, 'Hey' when we walked in, and went about their business like nothing was unusual," Thielke recalls. "We just put them to bed and hoped they'd sleep in the next day. Not much you could say to a free babysitter."

Often, these intergenerational power struggles revolve around a common theme: grandparents either unfamiliar or dismissive of the modern parents' newfangled tangle of safety rules.

Josephine Lindgren, 40, a New Jersey mom of two who contributes to the parenting blog SVMoms.com, sent her parents to pick up her 2-year-old daughter from a friend's house while she and her husband were stuck in the hospital during a bout of false labor.

Later, Lindgren discovered her daughter had resisted the car seat, so the grandparents let her ride in the backseat on grandma's lap "Britney Spears-style."

"I was flabbergasted," Lindgren says. "I said, 'Please never let that happen again.'"

Lindgren chalks up the aberration to the direness of the situation, but also a basic generational divide. "My dad would say, 'You guys would sit in the front seat with no seat belt and me smoking and you are all fine.'"

Breast-feeding seems to be an issue especially rife with mother-daughter drama. On the UrbanBaby.com message board, one mom laments how she discovered her parents were sneaking formula into the bottle of her breast-fed infant, convinced the baby was undernourished and that breast milk was "toxic." Another grandmother tossed her daughter-in-law's carefully cultivated three-month supply of pumped breast milk to make room in the freezer for her snacks.

### **Control issues**

Why do some grandparents overstep their bounds? Do they think only Grandma knows best? Or do they look at their adult child and still see that tyrannical toddler in a tutu?

"It really is a control issue," says Karen Keenan, who currently spearheads the Coalition for the Restoration of Parental Rights, a grassroots group that provides a sympathetic ear for parents being sued for visitation rights by grandparents. "It's the grandparent trying to control the adult child."

Christine Crosby, founder of Grand magazine, a publication aimed at grandparents, suspects this particular set of grandparents may act out because, well, baby boomers are used to getting their way.

"Today's generation of grandparents were very empowered," she says. "They grew up in the '60s, and truly have had freedom that no previous generation ever had. Giving that control up doesn't come naturally."

Stephanie Kutzen, a social worker outside Chicago and author of "Grandparenting: Tales From The Crib — When Your Children Become Parents," believes there is a "dissonance" and some resentment that their children rely more on information gleaned from the Internet or parenting classes than their hard-earned wisdom.

But all agree that grandparents need to accept and abide by their children's rules if they want to maintain good relationships with their families.

"You will cause all kind of problems if you maintain you are still the boss when your adult children become the parents," says Crosby, who learned this lesson firsthand when she took it upon herself to have "the birds and the bees" discussion with her 9-year-old granddaughter. "I thought it was my duty, and I didn't think my daughter was going to get around to it."

After the irate mom forced her to apologize, she realized her mistake. "What I've learned now, how important it would have been if I respected my daughter and said, 'I'd love to have this conversation, is it all right?'"

Whether it's announcing a grown child's pregnancy or buying expensive gifts for the grandkids, Crosby says the golden rule is "ask permission."

### **Bite your lip — until it bleeds**

And if you disagree with the answer? "Bite your lip, and let it go," advises Crosby. "You don't like how your daughter is dressing your granddaughter or growing your grandson's hair into a mullet? Just bite your lip — until it's swollen bleeding."

Kutzen has a different strategy. "Humming, I hum," she laughs. "That was the art I learned."

"You need to have a mantra: I am not in charge," maintains Lillian Carson, a psychotherapist based in Santa Barbara, Calif., and the author of "The Essential Grandparent."

"It's very hard to hold your tongue, because we've been there, done that, and can see things happening that we feel have consequences that are negative," she says.

Carson believes the dark side of grandparenting is standing by and watching your adult children raising their kids differently than what you believe to be right — even when you know in your heart they are making a mistake.

Carson remembers being convinced her 6-year-old grandson wasn't ready to go to sleepaway camp. She wrote a letter to his parents, expressing her concerns but that she would respect their decision. Despite her misgivings, the boy was sent to camp — and had a miserable time. "It was a clear and painful experience of not being in charge," she recalls.

That doesn't mean grandparents have no role, simply that they must take a supporting one that puts their children first.

"If grandparents can develop a climate of goodwill, then that creates room for mistakes," says Carson. "If the parents understand that the grandparents want the best for the family, then there can be some understanding and forgiveness if things don't go just right."

### **Pick your battles**

However, the onus is also on parents to show some grace. So the kids have stayed up late, eaten too much sugar and watched a "Hannah Montana" marathon. Take a breather and ask yourself if it's really worth berating the grandparents.

"Kids know that it's different at Grandma's," Carson insists. "It doesn't undo all the good healthy things you've tried to instill in your child."

In more extreme cases, speaking up can cause irrevocable rifts. Keenan's involvement in the parental rights group began when she and her ex-husband scolded his daughters' grandmother for feeding them too much candy. "The response was that she was their grandmother and could do whatever she wanted. We started limiting the time she spent with them — and she in return sued us for visitation."

"You definitely have to stand up for yourself — they're your kids, you are the parent," Keenan says. "If your child is in danger or going to be hurt you have to lay down the law. But, if it's small things, I tell parents, let it slide."

Parents should also make sure their nitpickiness isn't verging on neurosis. Grandparents retaliate with some of their own "parents gone wild" stories: those who insist the grandparents watch safety videos or take CPR classes before being allowed to bathe or handle a grandchild.

Above all, parents should keep in mind the value of the grandparent in the children's lives. "Grandparents can be much more accepting and patient," says Carson. "They can really believe in the grandchild in a way that parents are not able to. Parents need to honor that and bend a little bit."

For this reason, Cannon is willing to let the blue bear incident slide, certain her mother-in-law adores her son and had the best of intentions.

"It's not worth it to make waves," Cannon says. "I've had great relationships with my grandparents. I would want Rowan growing up to have that, too."

*Melissa Schorr is a Boston-based freelancer who has written for the Wall Street Journal, the Boston Globe Magazine, Reuters Health, Working Mother, SELF, GQ and People. She is the author of the young adult novel "Goy Crazy."*

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