

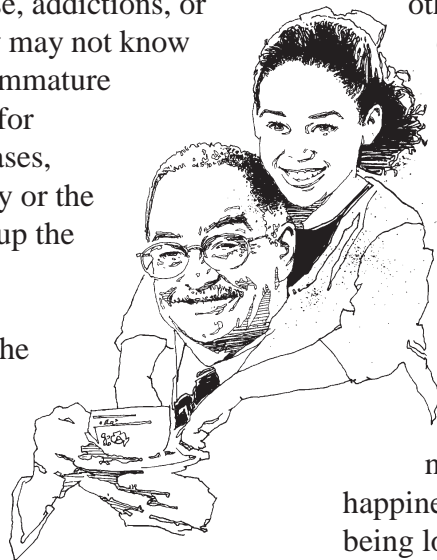


## Grandparents as Parents: Constructive Discipline

Family members need each other. When the need is for the grandparents to parent their grandchildren, each comes into the relationship having experienced great loss and its accompanying grief. The children may have lost a parent(s) and had their lives shattered by death or divorce. Or they may have become helpless victims, having lost their innocence, security, and faith because of abuse, addictions, or family dysfunction. They may not know their father and have an immature mother who is not ready for responsibility. In these cases, either the extended family or the court system has to pick up the parenting role if these children are to survive.

The grandparents, on the other hand, have lost the dream of having their own child healthy, successful, well adjusted, and happily married with loving children. They have also lost their expectation of enjoying their latter years with fewer responsibilities and more time for enjoying life. With the challenging, long-term responsibility of parenting their grandchildren, their resources of energy, health, and money may be taxed beyond their comfort zone. They may feel guilty, angry, frustrated, hurt, scared, and although they love their grandchildren, hopelessly trapped.

While the grandparents are struggling with their own emotions, they are thrust into the demanding role of caring for grandchildren. The grandparents may be so fatigued by their grief and workload, and so sympathetic to the child's pain, that they totally neglect the very necessary parental role of helping the children to respect themselves and to be the kind of persons that others like to be around. Abundant love and constructive discipline are the keys.



### Abundant Love

No one ever gets too much love. Real love is wanting what is best for the other person, and all humans flourish when love abounds. This is very different from indulgence, which damages the child by making him demanding and self-centered, sometimes to the point that neither he nor anyone in his life ever finds true happiness. Every child needs to know that his being loved is not dependent on what he does. He is and always will be loved.

### Constructive Discipline

For many people, discipline is a harsh word that means punishment. But the origin of the word is related to the word disciple, or one who learns from another. When we refer to "self-disciplined people," we are referring to those who regulate their own behavior. They have reached the point where they do not need someone else to say, "Do this" or "Don't do

that.” They have the ability to decide what is appropriate behavior and behave accordingly. If children are to become self-disciplined, they must have good role models.

Discipline and punishment are not the same thing. The goal of discipline is to teach. The goal of punishment is to inflict a penalty in retaliation for a wrongdoing.

### Suggestions for Discipline

There is not one right way to discipline children. It is most important to remember that if you have a warm, loving relationship with the child, and if you communicate well with him or her most of the time, specific techniques are not crucial.

We all blow it once in a while, so if you make a mistake, don’t give up. Don’t be afraid to say, “I’m trying to learn to be a better grandparent. What I did just now is not what I want to do. I’m sorry. Will you forgive me?”

Jennifer Birckmayer, of the Cornell Cooperative Extension Service, lists the following seven principles of discipline:

1. *Focus on the do’s instead of the don’ts.* For example, instead of, “Don’t drop the egg,” say, “Carry the egg in both hands like this.”
2. *Protect and preserve children’s feelings that they are lovable and capable.* For example, instead of, “Can’t you do anything right?” say, “That’s a big job; let’s see if we can do it together.”

3. *Offer children choices only when you are willing to abide by their decisions.* For example, instead of, “What would you like for breakfast today?” say, “Would you like toast and cheese or cereal for breakfast?”
4. *Change the environment instead of the child’s behavior.* For example, put an adult at the table between the 15-month-old and the four-year-old when the youngest is too tempted to put his sticky fingers on her braids.
5. *Work with children instead of against them.* For example, a one-year-old eats much better when she feeds herself; however, this makes a big mess. What to do? Put newspapers on the floor; find her a big bib, and stand by with sponges.
6. *Give children safe limits they can understand. Recognize their feelings without accepting their actions. Maintain your authority calmly and consistently.* For example, Claudia, age two, has pushed a chair close to the stove so she can see what’s bubbling in all of those pots. Your response? “No! You must never do that! You might get burned if you are so close to the stove.”
7. *Set a good example. Speak and act only in the way you want your grandchildren to speak and act.* For example, instead of “Darn it, Bobby, quit stalling and finish your dinner,” say, “Bobby, you have five minutes to finish your dinner. Then you will have no more food

### Picky Eater Syndrome

Children fear new things, food in particular. The best way to ensure that your grandchild eats a variety of foods is to introduce the foods when the child is learning to eat. However, for most grandparents, it’s probably too late for that.

Here are techniques to get your finicky grandchild to try new foods. Serve the new food with familiar foods. If your grandchild doesn’t eat the new food, offer it again next week and the next. It takes about 10 times for the food to become familiar. Finally, your grandchild will try it without prodding.



Another technique is to encourage your grandchild to help prepare the new food. Talk about where it came from, what it looks like, and what it tastes like. Give the new food an interesting name; you could call kiwi fruit “Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle” food.

Children learn by example. If you want your grandchild to eat the food, eat it with your grandchild, especially when it’s a new food. No matter how hard you try to introduce new foods, children won’t like them all. After all, adults don’t like all foods either.

until the next meal time.”

Have few rules, but always enforce them.

Someone said you only need two. Can you think of anything not covered in these?

1. Obey your grandparents and anyone they place in authority over you.
2. Be kind to people, animals, plants, and things.

### **Why Children Misbehave**

- There is usually a reason for a child’s misbehavior. Invite kids to share their feelings, and listen with real concern.
- If the child misbehaves because of fatigue, lack of vigorous physical activity, etc., try changing the child’s routine to develop good health habits.
- Expect children to behave as children, not adults. Keep expectations age appropriate, and use consistent discipline.
- If the child lacks confidence, try to use more encouraging words, rather than put-downs.
- Separate behavior from the person. Be sure your grandchild feels loved, even when the grandchild’s behavior is unacceptable. Don’t call the child a “stupid kid,” but say, “that was a foolish thing to do.”
- Children need extra attention when they are upset by change.
- Children will react to encouragement, approval, and kind words—just like adults. They will repeat behavior that brings kind words.
- Children who feel loved will want to act the way their grandparents want them to act.
- If a child has special needs, search out help. Do not ignore severe behavioral problems or think that all problems will disappear with love alone.

(Adapted from Elaine Wilson, parenting specialist, Oklahoma State Extension Service.)

### **Teens Are People, Too**

All teens are on emotional roller coasters, and teens who have upheavals in their lives are affected even more. Don’t let them suffer alone just because they don’t initiate sharing. Draw them out with active listening, and get them talking. They won’t want boundaries, but they

will need them. Grandparents will need endless patience and understanding.

Teens’ obedience to rules must grow out of their respect for you, which you must earn. They will welcome an opportunity to help make the rules by which you both can live. They should also consider with you what the punishment should be if they choose to disregard the rules. This calls for time in a family council meeting, probably on a regular basis, with clear and open communication and conflict resolution skills understood. Consider conflicts as problems to be solved, not people to be attacked. Everyone involved should participate.

### *For inspiration. . .*

Most kids hear what you say; some kids do what you say, but all kids do what you do.

*Anonymous*

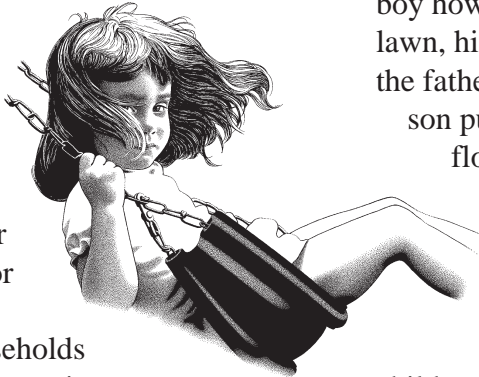
### **How to Solve a Problem**

1. Clearly identify the specific problem or conflict.
2. Openly communicate, “What do I/we really want?”
3. Brainstorm with those involved for every possible solution. Do not evaluate or criticize.
4. List the pros and cons of every suggestion.
5. Choose the best possible solution. It should be acceptable to everyone. No one should always give, and no one should always take.
6. Make a plan to implement the best solution with time goals and priorities. Delegate responsibilities.
7. Put your plan into action. Monitor and communicate progress.
8. Check out how it is working. If it is working well, the problem is solved. If not, start again with the second possible solution.
9. After the trial time, evaluate to see if it worked. If not, start the process over again.

### **Demanding Children**

Children of all ages can be pretty demanding at times. John Rosamond writes, “Let’s untangle the situation. It is a matter of manners and the

child's proper place in the family. It is rude to demand of parents and grandparents. By allowing the child to demand and disrupt the family harmony, you are aiding and abetting his grasp for control of the family. As long as he can control the family by demanding, whining, and complaining, he will continue to do so. Stop catering to him! Set reasonable rules, and consistently enforce them. He will hurl himself at the barricades for a few weeks, then become convinced and cooperative. Take your choice—eight weeks or eight more years.”



Child-centered households produce neither happy marriages nor happy children. A happy grandmother and grandfather are most apt to have happy grandchildren when the children's roles are clearly and lovingly defined.

### Visits/Discipline from the Child's Parent

When the parent visits a child who is being reared by the grandparent, roles are reversed. Visits from the parent should disrupt the child's life as little as possible. Since the child needs every bond strengthened and maintained, grandparents and parents must have an agreement that every relationship will be supported and that each will do what is best for the child. Discipline from the parent is dependent on whether the grandparent has full-time, legal custody. If this is the case, the parent needs to respect the grandparent's role.

In a sense, the parent takes on the grandparenting role and may want to indulge the children to express their love and to try to make up for not being with the children regularly. A clear understanding of what is in the children's best interest is necessary, and the grandparent may need to communicate this when the children are not present. Perhaps it would be helpful for the grandparent to supply, before the visit, a list of what the children need or could use. It is necessary to accept reality and not be jealous when the children express attachment and love to

the parent or grandparent. Both relationships are desirable.

### Remember Your Priorities

Jack Cranfield, author of *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, tells the following story. A neighbor was teaching his seven-year-old son to push the gas-powered lawn mower. As the father showed the boy how to turn the mower at the end of the lawn, his wife called him with a question. When the father looked at his wife to answer her, the son pushed the mower through a beautiful flower bed, leaving a two-foot path cut to the ground. As the father turned and saw what happened, he started to lose control. His wife walked quickly to him, put her hand on his shoulder, and said, "Remember, we are raising

children, not flowers." When you're losing it:

- *Stop.* Calm down. Don't let your temper get the best of you.
- *Look and listen.* What's really going on here? Why? What does your grandchild need to learn?
- *Think.* What can you do to help your grandchild learn?
- *Act.* Put your plan into action. Trust yourself. In times of stress, grandparents need to remember their priorities. When we do, self esteem and love will blossom in our grandchildren more beautifully than any flower bed ever could.

**See the Texas AgriLife Extension Service Grandparents Raising Grandkids website for more information:**

<http://grandparentsraisinggrandkids.tamu.edu>

Permission was granted by Dr. Sam Quick, Human Development and Family Relations Specialist, Kentucky Cooperative Extension, to adapt this material for use by the Texas AgriLife Extension Service. Adapted by Dr. Judith L. Warren, Gerontology Specialist; and Dr. Dorothy James, Family Life Specialist (retired), Family Development and Resource Management, Texas AgriLife Extension Service, The Texas A&M System, College Station, Texas.

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