

*If I had known what fun
having grandchildren was,
I would have had them first!*
~Author Unknown

*Have children while your
parents are still young
enough to take care of them.*
~Rita Rudner

*A grandmother is a little
bit parent, a little bit
teacher, and a little bit
best friend.*
~Author Unknown

“Oh, _____! My Mother/Mother-In-Law is Coming.”

By Karen L. Rancourt, Ph.D.

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Common words used to fill in the blank run the gamut from genuine excitement to resignation to dread:
“Oh, Fantastic!” “Oh, Good!” “Oh, Okay.” “Oh, Drat!” “Oh, Poop!”

Key to a healthy, happy and comfortable relationship between a young or new mom and her mom / mother-in-law: *sensitivity*, *boundaries*, and *trust*.

I. The Big Face Off

1. **In one corner we find the elder moms and mothers-in-law (mils)**, full of knowledge, experience, confidence and advice, looking for respect and a place at the table. **In the other corner, we find the young or new moms**, full of book knowledge, child development courses, training classes, input from close friends, their own personal ideas, who want to assert their own ideas and independence.
2. **The balancing act for moms/ mils** is between trying to be helpful and not being perceived as judgmental, critical, dominating or interfering.
3. **The balancing act for young and new moms** is between taking advantage of what their moms / mils can offer in positive ways, while maintaining a sense of separateness and independence.
4. As well intentioned as the moms / mils may be, **the power in the relationship rests with the new parents**, as they should be the ones who make the rules for how their children are raised. They have final responsibility, not the moms / mils.
5. **This shifting of power can become a source of conflict** if it is not understood and acknowledged, as there are often underlying issues from past relationships that are affecting those in the present, as well as new issues arising.

II. Prior Relationships / History Factors / Potential Conflicts

1. **Three characteristics distinguish family conflict from other types: *intensity*, *complexity*, and the *duration of relationships*** (Bowlby).
 - *Intensity*: relationships between family members are typically the closest, most emotionally intense of any in the human experience, involving the highest level of attachment, affection, and commitment. There is typically daily contact for many

years that bonds individuals together. Family conflicts are typically more intense than conflict in other groups. This intensity means that managing conflicts may be more difficult in families, and that their consequences can be more damaging.

- *Complexity*: most pertinent type of complexity in family relationships—ambivalence. The web of family relationships includes dimensions such as love, respect, friendship, hate, resentment, jealousy, rivalry, and disapproval
- *Duration*: A person's parents and siblings will always be their parents and siblings.

2. Conflict:

- Research suggests that **if there are five positive behaviors for each negative behavior, then relationships are still healthy**. As a result of such findings, family conflict is not always considered to be a problematic pattern, unless conflict occurs in forms that are physically or psychologically damaging.
3. **A family has a predominant style of dealing with conflict**; these conflict management styles are learned in childhood: Competition, Accommodation, Avoidance, Compromise, Collaborate

III. A Change in Roles From Being a Mom to Being a Grandmom

1. Moms / mils may feel some loss of status and power as their position in the family changes with the arrival of grandchildren: The grandparents are no longer in charge.
2. Many moms / mils disagree with their children's approach to parenting, and forget that the new parents have their own ideas -- many of which are based on trying not to repeat what they see as mistakes their parents made!
3. **Understanding differences in parenting preferences can go a long way in increasing understanding and acceptance and decreasing potential conflicts.**
4. There are no rights or wrongs with parenting preferences, *only differences*. Each style is valid and results in happy, well-adjusted children. Three main preferential styles include:
 - Practical, traditional
 - Spontaneous, expressive
 - Mood and emotion sensitive
5. Try to understand your parenting preferences and those of your mom / mil by completing the assessment tool, **Thumb-Nail Sketch of Your Parenting Preferences** (copy at end of this document). This tool gives you a quick way to assess your parenting preferences. There are no Right or Wrong responses. This is about *preferences*. All three preference sets are valid and can result in raising well-adjusted, self-sufficient and happy kids!

IV. Levels of Grandmom Involvement

1. Detached = physically / emotionally unavailable
2. Passive = minimal responsiveness
3. Supportive = tries to be helpful and involved by doing things, running errands
4. Authoritative = “parent like” in behavior
5. Influential = combo of supportive and authoritative

V. Styles of Grandmomming

1. *The Warm & Fuzzy Grandmom* (aka Honey Bear)
Typically says: “I love you / You're perfect! You're beautiful just the way you are.”
2. *The Strict & Stern Grandmom* (aka Frostbite)
Typically says: “Turn the volume down! And clean up that mess!”
3. *The Super-Spoiler Grandmom* (aka Grammy Credit Card!)
Typically says: “Merry Christmas! Happy Birthday! Happy Bastille Day!” (Basically any holiday greeting that can justify gift-giving.)
4. *The Hovering Helicopter Grandmom* (aka Hummingbird)
Typically says: “Who, me? I'm not one to meddle or hover.”
5. *The Reluctant Grandmom* (aka Eel)
Typically says: “Okay, maybe, I'll check, I'll let you know. Not sure. I might be busy.”
6. *The Perfect / Near Perfect Grandmom!* (aka Lucky Us!)
Typically says: “I'll do whatever the situation calls for.”

(Note: Based on work of Daniel Nettle, author of *Personality: What Makes You the Way You Are*.)

VI. Guidelines for New / Young Moms

1. Lighten up! **Allow your mom / mil special dispensation at times, to bend the family rules.** Get in touch with what is really going on that you totally freak out when your mom / mil lets your child have an extra dessert. It's probably not really about a chocolate chip cookie. You own this one!
2. **Be aware of and be sensitive to the stress that can come from the rivalry or jealousy that can develop between your mom and your mil.** You may have to lay out some consistent rules you need both your mom / mil to follow, e.g., cap how much can be spent on gifts, equalize amount of time they get to spend with the grandchildren.

Sometimes you will favor your mom over your mil, or vice versa. It can be a case of proximity, with one simply living closer than another and therefore able to be more involved. But sometimes you may prefer the values and personalities of your mom / mil, e.g., you may be concerned about your mom / mil being too permissive, or disciplines your children too much, or doesn't offer youngsters anything to do but use their e-devices (Gelberg-Goff).

You may want to have a discussion with your mom / mil to set expectations and rules, either consistent ones for both your mom / mil, or customize them; that is, you may, in fact, have one set of expectations and rules for your mom, and another for your mil.

3. If there are significant differences between your parenting philosophies and approaches, and those of your mom / mil, **explain calmly your views, but don't try to get your mom or mil to agree that you are "right."** Your mom / mil merely have to agree to honor your rules when they interact with your children.
4. If you choose to address an issue in a family meeting with your mom / mil, it is suggested that the parent who is their son or daughter take the lead. **It's usually much easier to hear about an issue or concern if it is initially presented by the son or daughter.**
5. **Tell your mom / mil specifically what she can do to be of help,** e.g., separate the whites from the darks and do a wash, dry them, fold them and leave them on top of the bed; take the baby for a walk to the park and do not let her fall asleep. (And bite your tongue or correct in a gentle, loving way if your mom / mil gets it wrong!)
6. **When your mom / mil is babysitting, write down the information they will need** about nap time and bedtime routines and special sleeping companions, such as stuffed animals and blankets, feeding schedules, off-limits food and television programs, prescriptions.
7. **Help you mom / mil purchase appropriate car seats for their own vehicles, and show them how to install and de-install them.** Same for strollers, pack 'n plays and any other equipment you want them to use or own.

8. **Suggest activities for your mom / mil to do with your kids.** You know the area and the special activities going on. Provide all the details for it to work out, e.g., print out driving directions, where to park, get tickets in advance, suggestions for restaurants that the kids will like and is in line with their budgets.
9. **Ask your mom / mil for their perceptions on how your child(ren) seem to be doing.** You may even ask for advice on various techniques you might try.
10. **Make sure your mom / mil is clear about her role when she is alone with your nanny or babysitter.** If there are problems, your mom / mil needs to know whether you want them to get involved or stay in the background.
11. **Help your mom / mil with long distance grandparenting.** Suggest that your mom / mil:
 - a. Take advantage of the Internet: e.g., E-mail, Skype, share sites, set up chat times, photo albums, sites with information of places to visit together, pictures of things you've been doing, CDs of favorite music.
 - b. Keep notes of what she learns from your child(ren) in phone calls / Skyping / visits, so she can reference this information in future interactions, e.g., doll's names, their friends' names, games they like. This helps the long distance bonding and is proof positive to the kids that your mom / mil is listening to them and is interested in their lives.
 - c. Plan things together to do at their next visit.
 - d. Tell them about her hobbies, and when possible, share her hobbies, and teach them e.g., chess, biking, knitting, baking.

VII. Guidelines for Moms / Mils

1. **Remember that you are a grandparent, not the parent.** This means you must do a lot of tongue biting and allow your daughter / daughter-in-law to set the boundaries and rules for your relationship with your grandchildren. If you want to have ongoing and welcomed access to your grandchildren, defer, defer, defer.
2. **Do not try to impose your values or parenting style or preferences on your daughter / daughter-in-law.** Ask your daughter / daughter-in-law to tell you about any books they'd like you to read, or videos to watch, that can help you better understand how she's trying to raise her children.
3. **Pay special attention to your daughter / daughter-in-law's verbal and non-verbal cues.** If you sense your behavior is causing her/hem stress or discomfort, re-read guideline #1. A sincere apology can go a long way.
4. **Do not ask your grandchild to be complicit in any secrets.** You can plan a surprise with your grandchild, but never ask him/her to "not tell your parents."
5. If you feel your daughter / daughter-in-law prefers to spend more time with the other set of grandparents, you **may want to ask if there are any specific things you could be doing**

to be a better grandparent. If you ask, your job is to listen, not try to defend or explain yourself.

6. **Check with your daughter / daughter-in-law on the appropriateness and timing of gifts or money.**
7. When you look around your daughter / daughter-in-law's house and **see some jobs that might be done, ask if it would be helpful if you either took them yourself, or if you or took care of hiring someone to do them.** Over time you will work out with your daughter / daughter-in-law what things you can just automatically do without causing an issue.
8. **Be real clear on your daughter's / daughter-in-law's preferences about visiting:** should you call first, or is showing up announced permissible.
9. If your daughter / daughter-in-law has a nanny or babysitter, **discuss with her your role when you're alone with the nanny or babysitter.**
10. If you live within commuting distance and it is possible, **talk with your daughter / daughter-in-law about setting aside regular time(s) each week to come into the home.** Also discuss how best to use this dedicated time. Knowing she has a free afternoon to look forward to every Wednesday can make your daughter / daughter-in-law feel like she's won the lottery!
11. **Do not play favorites amongst your grandchildren;** do not make comparisons.
12. **Say only positive things about your grandchildren's parents;** same goes for any other grandparents in the family.
13. **Give your grandchildren a very clear message about the importance and value of education.**
14. **Check with your daughter / daughter-in-law before making any purchases of equipment** (car seats, cribs, pack 'n plays, strollers) to keep in your car or house or to give to them as gifts.
15. **If you will be doing long distance grandmomming, work closely with your daughter / daughter-in-law** in finding ways and doing things to make this work for everyone.

Key to a healthy, happy and comfortable relationship between a young or new mom and her mom / mother-in-law: *sensitivity, boundaries, and trust.*

Thumb-Nail Sketch of Your Parenting Preferences

This tool gives you a quick way to assess your parenting preferences. There are no Right or Wrong responses. This is about *preferences*. All three preference sets are valid and can result in raising well-adjusted, self-sufficient and happy kids!

Rate each item in the three boxes below on a scale from 1 to 5. Then total your numbers in each box. When completed, see **Interpreting the Results of Your Thumb-Nail Sketch of Your Parenting Preferences**.

- 5 – Very much describes you
- 4 – Describes you
- 3 – Sometimes describes you
- 2 – Doesn't really describe you
- 1 – Doesn't at all describe you, in fact you may avoid it

PARENTING PREFERENCES SET #1

1. You tend to use more of a rational parenting approach than an emotional one _____
 2. You have strict rules that you like to be adhered to. _____
 3. You do not like your authority challenged. _____
 4. You think children should focus on the task at hand and finish it. _____
 5. You tend to be a decision maker and have the final word. _____
 6. You insist on your child performing well and you monitor performance closely. _____
 7. Your child's future financial security is a priority. _____
 8. You may be quite critical of your child's mistakes. _____
 9. You like activities involving your child to be planned in advance. _____
 10. You put a strong emphasis on your child understanding priorities. _____
- TOTAL** _____

PARENTING PREFERENCES SET #2

1. You take your child's opinions and ideas into account. _____
 2. You encourage a variety of interests. _____
 3. You encourage your child to experiment and try something new. _____
 4. You like to do a lot of "What if..." or "Let' pretend..." with your child. _____
 5. You are not a big stickler for rules. _____
 6. You like to do things with your child on the spur of the moment. _____
 7. You sometimes forget important details, e.g., dates, appointments. _____
 8. You like to surprise your child. _____
 9. You like to share way-out ideas with your child. _____
 10. You like having several things going on simultaneously with your child. _____
- TOTAL** _____

PARENTING PREFERENCES SET #3

1. You like a lot of sharing with your child and expect the same back. _____
 2. You often react in an overly emotional way (and sometimes regret it). _____
 3. You encourage group activities and want your child to be a "joiner." _____
 4. You involve your child a lot in decision making. _____
 5. Your child's happiness is more important to you than performance. _____
 6. You are very sensitive to your child's feelings and moods. _____
 7. You like to encourage activities that will develop your child as a person. _____
 8. You tend to regard your child's "failures" as a personal failure or shortcoming. _____
 9. You like to talk about your feelings and encourage your child to do the same. _____
 10. You tend to be accommodating and accepting with problems with your child. _____
- TOTAL** _____

Interpreting the Results of Your Thumb-Nail Sketch of Your Parenting Preferences

This tool gives you a quick way to assess your parenting preferences. **There are no Right or Wrong responses.** This is about **preferences**.

All three preference sets are valid and can result in raising well-adjusted, self-sufficient and happy kids!

Look at your total score in each of the three Parenting Preferences Sets to get an indication of what your responses may suggest about your preferences.

45+ = Very high preference
35 to 44 = High preference
25 to 34 = Average preference
15 to 24 = Low preference
10 to 14 = Very low preference

The items in **Parenting Preferences Set #1** describe **Practical and Traditional** preferences for parenting.
The items in **Parenting Preferences Set #2** describe **Spontaneous and Expressive** preferences for parenting.
The items in **Parenting Preferences Set #3** describe **Mood and Emotion Sensitive** preferences for parenting.

Please remember that these are generalizations, and you may agree or disagree with what is suggested by your totals.

To repeat: **There are no Right or Wrong responses.** This is about **preferences**: Strong preferences are not more desirable than average or low preferences, or vice versa. All three preference sets are valid and can result in raising well-adjusted, self-sufficient and happy kids!

If you are a young or new mom, you may want to ask your mom or mother-in-law to complete this quick assessment, too. Sharing and discussing your individual results might be a fun and safe way to understand better each other's parenting preferences. This understanding may be helpful in pinpointing ways in which your parenting preferences mesh, and ways in which there may be some strong differences of opinion.

Some "Aha moments" could result!

(Note: This tool, created by Karen Rancourt, uses research and models published by Dr. Korbus Neethling, known for his work in whole brain thinking and communicating.)