



## News

# Are grandparents obligated to help out?

Mary E. Hart

updated: 9/24/2007 12:58 PM

Ahh, the days of yesteryear, when many generations of a family lived in the same house or at least the same street. Grandparents and other family members were always around to watch the children at a moment's notice. It's not quite like that these days with most families no longer living in the same state. So, what's the modern family to do? Can they (or should they) still rely on grandparents to help out with the kids?

A recent Chicago Tribune article profiled grandparents that lived by the "have it all" brand of living. These grandparents do see their kids and grandkids, but they also run corporations, do Pilates and go on faraway vacations. With their busier lifestyles (3 out of 10 grandparents work) and physical distance coupled with a modern family's need for support, it prompted a mini-debate among readers and staff regarding the big question, "Are grandparents obligated to help out with their grandchildren?"

The reality is that grandparents are heavily participating in childcare. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that grandparents are the most common childcare providers for children under 5. According to the AARP, grandparents provide regular childcare for 23 percent of children under the age of 5. The number rises to 34 percent for children who live only with

their dads. But there are clearly pockets of tension out there among some families, so we turned to grandparents and parents to get their say on this controversial matter.

## **Different desires**

When it comes to helping out with grandkids, it sometimes depends on which side of the family you are talking about. Paternal grandparents could be all about watching their grandchildren every chance they get, while the maternal grandparents could lead busier lives and not be available.

Barbara of Tewksbury has a family like the above. "My parents baby sit my son, Gideon, weekly when they are in New Hampshire, and while they're in Florida for five months a year, they don't. During the time that they're in New Hampshire, they want to spend as much time as they can with my son and he wants to spend time with them."

She adds, "While it can be hard for them to have him for long periods of time, they don't see spending time with him as a burden. Gideon brings lots of joy to my life and he does the same for my parents. They laugh with Gideon far more than they get frustrated."

Barbara's in-laws are another story. "When my step-mother-in-law found out I was pregnant, she said 'Don't ever ask us to baby sit', and they never have; nor do they spend time with Gideon without Sean or I being there. Their relationship with him is very limited to 3 to 5 visits per year because of their busy schedule and those visits consist more of visiting with me and Sean, than with Gideon. They never spend time with Gideon without Sean or I being there. So, they don't really have a relationship with him. It's their loss. I don't think grandparents' should feel obligated to spend time with their grandchildren, but I do think they should want to. Their grandchildren are an extension of their children's lives. If they truly want to be a part of their own children's lives, they should spend some time with their grandchildren."

## **When grandparents don't work out**

Say your parents are available to watch your children, and willing to do so, but you don't want them to? How can you deal with that situation without causing much strife?

Kate's parents used to watch her two boys on a part time basis; however, the situation quickly became uncomfortable when she and her husband got the impression it was becoming burdensome for her parents.

"Neither of them would say it was getting to be too much for them or that they would rather not take such a regular child-care role anymore, but instead they took the passive-aggressive role and became critical of our working hours and angry if we picked them up even five minutes later than planned," said Kate of Lawrence. "As a result, we withdrew and stopped asking them to baby sit completely. Occasionally they would ask us to go out so they could watch them. Sadly, our early experiences has left me very anxious about using them for babysitting."

She adds, "I don't want to keep their grandchildren away from them but I wish they would feel more comfortable saying 'no' when they really don't want to or can't watch the kids instead of agreeing and then playing the martyr. I'd love for them to pitch in once in a while but I don't have expectations or feel they are obligated to watch my children at all."

### **The age of the Granny-Nanny**

Being a part of their children and grandchildren's lives is very important to some grandparents, and many are even helping out in ways that hearken back to the times when families all lived under one roof.

"I don't think grandparents are obligated to help out their children by being, as I name myself, 'granny-nannies'," says Barbara Estrin of Rhode Island. "I can only talk about my own experience. I was working full-time in a job that I loved -- chairing the English Department at Stonehill College -- and also writing, busily launching a new project when my first granddaughter was born in May of 2002. Six months after her birth, my husband died after a brief but extremely intense

bout with cancer. I already knew before my husband died that I would be caring for my granddaughter Margot at least one day a week while my daughter went back to work part-time. In January of 2003, when my daughter went to work as a freelance writer for a law firm, I began my official granny-nanny job. I slept in my daughter and son-in-law's house on Monday nights and then took care of Margot from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. on Tuesday. I would go up to Massachusetts from Rhode Island on Monday, after my classes, and gradually extended my duties on Monday afternoons, to allow my daughter extra time to work."

After her second granddaughter, Nadine, was born she realized that caring for two children (especially juggling snow suits and car seats) was more than twice the work of one. She decided to retire from her job because she was too tired to be working full-time and juggling granny-nanny duties.

"I also knew -- and this is most important -- that now is the time when my daughter most needs me," she said. "Once the children are in school all day, my usefulness will fade. Finally, to me, there is nothing more interesting than a small child: not even Shakespeare and that's saying a lot!"

As for down the road, "Who knows what will happen when both girls are in school full-time?," says Estrin. "It may be that my grandchildren will be embarrassed to be seen with me. That's an inevitable response for all children, especially when they get old enough to prefer peers to family. But it may also turn out that we will have become, as I was with all four of my grandparents, great friends. What will I have missed during the five or six years I took off from being totally free of obligations? Nothing! What will I have gained: treasures of magical moments."

It seems that in the modern era where anything goes, what works for one family clearly doesn't work for another. The common consensus seems to be that grandparents should want to help out, at least in their children's eyes, but whether or not that's feasible is up to each family.

**Tip box**

Some grandparents don't enjoy babysitting. Others may want to limit the time they spend in this role. Talk to your family about how you feel and what your boundaries are. An honest conversation early on can help prevent bad feelings later. (source: AARP: Grandparenting: The joys and challenges)

*Mary Hart is a full-time editor, writer, and mom to a growing 5-year old boy with two loving sets of grandparents ready and willing to watch him when needed. Lucky boy! She can be reached at mehart@gmail.com.*