

How to Get Along With the Other Set of Grandparents

It's a grandparenting dilemma – how to share time, attention and defuse hot-button issues

By [Elizabeth Fishel](#) | June 22, 2023 | [Family and Relationships](#)

It's often said that when a couple marries, there are four ghosts dancing around the marriage bed: *his* mother and father and *her* mother and father.

When a baby is born to the new couple, those four presences may grow all the more insistent. Now they're grandparents, and most of the time, they want to be equally involved with the new family – visiting, babysitting, celebrating holidays, and so on.



"Grandkids have room in their hearts for secure attachments to all their grandparents." | Credit: Getty

True, sometimes one set of grandparents may not want to participate, or they're preoccupied with their other grandchildren, or live too far away and don't travel, or aren't in good health. But when both sets of grandparents want to be hands-on, that's when stresses can show up.

Bringing It Home

We had some uncertainty ourselves when expecting our long-awaited first grandchild two years ago. Our son and daughter-in-law, the new parents,

lived a short distance away, and the other grandparents lived on the opposite coast. Thrilled to step into our new role, we dreamed our proximity would mean uncomplicated access to this precious new family member.

Now we'd have to share our treasure, the first grandchild on both sides. How would this work out?

But a month before our granddaughter was born, imagine our surprise when we learned that the other grandparents were moving across the country to be near the new family themselves. We'd already become fast friends with the in-laws during the early years of our grown children's marriage and shared many good times together. Now we'd have

to share our treasure, the first grandchild on both sides. How would this work out?

As things turned out, very amicably. Each set of grandparents provides the help, attention and love that they can. And the other grandma and I spend happy hours checking in with each other about our granddaughter's every move. Who else has the patience to talk endlessly about baby minutiae: whether she's sleeping through the night, starting solid foods, or saying her first words? We're in love with the same girl, and she's able to love us both.

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To Each Set According to Their Ability

"Grandkids have room in their hearts for secure attachments to all their grandparents," says Dr. Rachel Ritvo, a child psychiatrist in Kensington, Maryland and retired Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at George Washington University. "The idea of the nuclear family is an aberration," she adds.

In many cultures around the world, grandparents live with their adult children and grandchildren, thus making hands-on help available daily, and

both sets often contribute to childcare. Jews are one of the only cultures that even have a name for a grandchild's other grandparents, *mehutanim* in Hebrew, or in Yiddish, *mehutan*, suggesting the importance of the in-law relationship.

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As the involved grandmother to four grandkids, ages four to thirteen, Ritvo sees how grandparents' many hands go far to lighten the child-raising load. She suggests that family elders ask themselves, "What are the routines and tasks that each set of grandparents can provide that fits into the puzzle of raising children?"

Maybe one pair of grandparents lives close by and can help with school pickups, after-school care, and backup if one of the grandkids is sick. But the other pair, who lives farther away, can offer to move in for a short stint when a new baby arrives to help cook and offer care, or later on, when the parents need a getaway. To each set of grandparents according to their ability: the new family has plenty of needs to go around.

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4 Ways to Defuse the Hot-Button Issues

Here are four other tips to ease some potential hot-button issues with the other set of grandparents in your family, according to Jane Isay, author of "Unconditional Love: A Guide to the Joys and Challenges of Being A Grandparent Today."

1. You're All On the Same Team

"The relationship with the other grandparents can be very much like sibling rivalry," says Isay. From the time a new baby is born, the two sets of grandparents may be quietly competing for time. Who's going to be the [first to visit](#) in the hospital, hold the newborn, watch the baby while the parents go out?

"At first you'll be logging who gets more minutes with the baby as if keeping track on a Fitbit," laughs Isay. "But eventually, you'll stop competing and realize that the more people who love the baby, the better."

There's one caveat, adds Isay, the mother of two sons: [Mothers-in-law](#) need to tread carefully at first. When a new family is forming, "The matrilineal line, mother and daughter, is more powerful than the mother-and-son connection," Isay points out. The mom of the new baby is generally "the Decider," and if she wants her own mother around to help her, so be it. If you're the father's parents, know that giving the new mother and her mother a special chance to bond can only be good for the new family as a whole.

2. Live and Let Live

Naturally, you'll be more in tune with the grandparents whose style you share. But what if the other grandparents' style is jarringly different from yours — they feed the grandkids nothing but hamburgers, and you're a vegetarian, for instance, or they're disciplinarians and you believe in talking it out.

Do your best to keep criticism to yourself, advises Isay. "The other grandparents are as old as you are, and you're not going to change them," she says about what she's learned from her own extended family with four teen-age grandkids. "It's not necessary to be best friends with your in-laws. Take your ego out of it, and then you can see their strengths." And don't grouse to your children on the subject. "If the other grandparents get on your nerves, call your best friend and tell her about it."

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3. Keep Holidays Conflict-Free

"I thought maybe once she died, I'd get Christmas," says a disgruntled grandmother when she hears the other grandparent is out of the picture in Lynn Steger Strong's new novel of domestic drama, "Flight."

Yes, holidays can become a tug-of-war

between both sides of a new family, but let your grown kids handle the plans and figure out how best to fairly and joyfully celebrate.

"Thank God for the two nights of Rosh Hashanah," says Isay about the Jewish New Year. In her family, each side gets one of the nights to host a family dinner with plenty of apples and honey to go around.

Other families divide Christmas Eve and the day itself, celebrate different nights of Hannukah or Kwanzaa, alternate taking charge of Thanksgiving and Christmas, include both sets of grandparents in the holidays, or find a different day to celebrate separately. Christmas in July, anyone?

4. Stay Close If You're the Distant Grandparent

Children live in the moment, Isay points out, and they don't experience time and space the way adults do. She tells a "paradigm story" about a little girl she met who has one set of grandparents down the street and the other, 3000 miles away, in Los Angeles.

When Isay asked whom she was closer to, the child was perplexed. Sure, she goes after school every day to the nearby grandparents, she said, but with the other grandparents, she goes to Disneyland. Her conclusion: "I love all my grandparents."

Other ways to create bridges with faraway grandchildren: Lure the distant family to visit you or visit them as time and money allow; meet up for a multi-generation family vacation; take each grandchild on a [special trip](#) — and of course, screens!

FaceTime saved a lot of far apart families during the pandemic and remains a wonderful [distance-bridger](#). On Zoom, an out-of-town grandparent can read a story, play a game or help with math homework.

"I want access whenever I can, because my immortality is in the memories that my grandchildren have of me," concludes Isay, "My job is to love them and give them these positive memories."

And her final word: "We have our hand on a link of history. Don't break the chain!"

Elizabeth Fishel is the author of five nonfiction books including *Sisters* and *Getting To 30: A Parent's Guide to the 20-Something Years* (with Jeffrey Arnett). She has contributed to numerous magazines including *Vogue*, *Ms.*, *New York*, *The Writer*, and *Oprah's O*. She has written for *Next Avenue* since 2014. [Read More](#)