

Ask the Expert: Mothers and Grandmothers: Making Sense of Messy Feelings!

by Maryellen P. Mullin, MA, MFT

My mom was not a good mom, but is a great grandma. It's hard for me to square this. What are some ways to frame this so I can move past it?"

Acknowledging that you are triggered when seeing your mom, now grandma, offer the grandchild something you did not receive (attention, understanding, etc.) is honest, involving messy feelings. It is not uncommon for adult children to feel neglected, jealous or resentful when they see their mom "give more" to a grandchild.

Find time to explore, reflect and process your reactions to gain deeper insights. Journal, talk to a friend or explore this experience in therapy. To move forward, focus on being curious and open to your thoughts, feelings and behaviors.

Connect with mom when you are ready. If the relationship is difficult and communication is tough, consider family therapy. Perhaps you both need to hear each others' experiences and acknowledge past hurts for either or both of you to heal.

"I start regressing into a rebellious teen when my mom gives me advice. I know that a lot of her advice is good. How can I work on accepting it graciously and really listening?"

"My mom was not a good parent, so it really burns me up when she gives me parenting advice. She's so nosy, following up to see if I've implemented her advice. How do I handle this?"

Mother-daughter relationships are complex. It takes time and work to mature the relationship as both women age and grow. If you regress back to a rebellious teen dynamic with mom, chances are, she reverts as well, perhaps handing out even more unsolicited advice!

Take some time to understand why are you are triggered. Self-reflect with honesty. Grown children often have sensitive spots

when hearing parental advice, as it may bring back feelings of being corrected, judged, criticized or shamed. It can be difficult to give the benefit of the doubt or to assume the best when your past experience of her advice has come at the expense of your feeling judged or criticized.

Consider what you would like your relationship to look like. Be specific. Perhaps you want your relationship with her to center on something other than your parenting. Mom may want to know if you implement her advice, not to be nosy, but

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to have some way of connecting with you.

Communicate with mom. Pay attention to your reactions and choose a different way to engage with her. Focus on your body language, tone and word choice. Awareness, self-restraint and practice in these three areas of communication will help enable you to handle interactions constructively. While it may be hard, and not bring total resolution, it can bring you enough of a sense of calm for you to carry on.

"How do I get my mom to understand my rules? For example, she's gives them treats when they visit her and I don't let them have sugar at home. I feel she is



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disrespecting me every time she hands them a cookie."

To a grandmother, an infant is fairly straightforward: a baby takes delight in grandmother's smile or comfort from being held or fed. Now that the infant/toddler stage is over, I wonder about her comfort level in her relationship with the grandchildren. Grandma may not be disrespecting you or your rules. Rather, her desire to be liked or stay connected to your kids may be motivating her behavior. In navigating her relationship with the kids, she sees that the sweet treats get positive responses.

Connect and communicate when you are not upset. Tell her what you do appreciate. Does she read, help with homework, play with or take walks with your children? Explain that these activities are special for the kids, creating memorable bonds to her. If grandma insists, tell her you prefer healthy treats or a tangible item, such as stickers. Convey that it is about the sugar, not the food. Food connects us, nurtures us and communicates care, love and cultural identity. Consider a mother-daughter morning to make no-bake healthy granola bars or to brainstorm other solutions collaboratively.

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