

Notes From a New Grandma

A new baby turns parents' lives upside down. Grandparents, too, must adjust to new territory, and there are usually a few missteps along the way.



When my granddaughter, Isabelle, was 9 days old, I learned the First Commandment of Grandparenthood: love thy grandchild as thyself, but never presume for one nanosecond that she's yours.

I had made the mistake of offering—too eagerly, I suppose—to hold her when she started squalling during dinner (which I had cooked and delivered to the new, sleepless parents), causing my son, Clay, to snap, “She’s my daughter, and I’ll hold her.” But 20 minutes later, when he and Tamar, his wife and Isabelle’s mother, decided they needed a Starbucks break, he gladly handed the baby over to me. That’s when I realized that even though I was present at the birth of my granddaughter and am drawn to her with a force that feels stronger than gravity, I am, in fact, backup, part of an extended-family support team, a relief player. I may be besotted, but I must win over Isabelle’s gatekeepers—her parents—in order to spend time with her.

Of course, there’s nothing wrong with this arrangement; it’s perfectly natural. The first time my parents came to visit after Clay was born, I recall feeling as proprietary about him as a mother tigress feels toward her cubs.

Even though my mother had managed to raise two children, I didn’t trust her alone in the room with my son—a fierce protective instinct that must surely be biological. Still, now that I’m on the far side of the fence, I’m discovering that the role of grandmother takes some getting used to as well, especially for women like me who are accustomed to speaking our mind, being in charge (read: bossy), and laying claim to those we love, notably our children. All things considered, this grandmother business is pretty humbling.

By Barbara Graham

VEER

"When Juliet, my granddaughter, was born last year, my natural impulse was to jump in with boundless enthusiasm," says New York City psychotherapist and author Florence Falk. "As a grandparent you feel none of the anxiety or responsibility that comes with being a parent. You're just flooded with love." But, Falk realized, "My son and daughter-in-law needed to assert their right of dominion. I had to curb my instincts to offer advice and, instead, take my cues from them." Not only that, she recalls with a laugh, it was as if she had to audition to prove that her babycare skills were up to snuff. "I was aware of them watching me like a hawk the first few times I changed Juliet's diaper," Falk says. "I knew that if I was going to have access to her, I had to abide by their rules even when I disagreed. It was a whole new family dynamic for which I was completely unprepared."

Tensions are bound to arise as new parents and new grandparents adjust not only to the presence of a baby, but also to the changing family order in which the adult children suddenly hold all the cards. "I know my mom tries to bite her tongue constantly," says Dawn Pons, an executive coach who lives in Arlington, Virginia, and is the mother of 4-month-old Sydney and 4-year-old Tyler. "She thinks our rules, such as no juice and no TV for the first two years, are ridiculous. And when I took Tyler to music class when he was 5 months old, she couldn't help calling it stupid."

Complicating matters, Pons adds, are the ever-changing guidelines that seem to barrage new parents and put them on the defensive even before they get criticism from their elders. "Parents today suffer from information overload," she says. "There are so many rules thrust on us that you feel like you're negligent if you don't follow every single one."

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God knows, I'd go straight to jail today if I rode home from the hospital with my newborn son cradled in my arms, as I did with Clay, instead of having him securely belted into a regulation, fire-department-installed car seat. What's more, as soon as we got home, I put my tiny boy down to sleep on his stomach—didn't everyone, per Dr. Spock? This leads me to the Second Commandment of Grandparenthood: listen to your adult children. They may know something you don't.

A lot depends on how the message is conveyed—and that works both ways. "I would rather have my mother say out loud what she's thinking than grumble under her breath," Pons says. "Talking things over allows me to say, 'I hear you, but I don't have to agree.'"

Though her mother is coming around, it is Pons's father who seems most open to candid discussions of generational differences in child rearing. "He pointed out that my mother, while she was raising her children, had two grandmothers nearby who helped out nearly every day," Pons says. "To her, it seemed natural that she should be very involved with her own grandkids. But our situation today is totally different. My husband and I are a team, and my parents live several hours away."

Grandparents want to do right—by their adult children and their grandchildren alike—but it takes time and, inevitably, a few missteps to feel their way into this new role. "I knew I wanted my Grandma role to be big, probably to a fault," says Estelle Slon, an artist in Washington, D.C., whose two grandkids—Sarah Lily, 3½, and Sammy, 8 months—live in New Jersey. "I have an outgoing personality, and I see now that when Sarah Lily came along, my daughter-in-law needed to feel confident as a mom before she



★ TRANSLATION: Oh, so this is what I look like when I don't have spit-up all over me. Cute! Mom, you said Similac Sensitive R.S.[™] formula reduces the frequency of spit-up by 54%! That's huge. You said it was even clinically shown. You also knew Similac Sensitive R.S. has DHA and ARA for my brain, and other things that keep me strong. And you knew to go to www.Similac.com for more information. Know what, Mom? I think R.S. stands for Really Smart.



www.Similac.com
 *In healthy 2-month-old babies compared to a standard formula. Data on file, AJ68, May 2007, Abbott Nutrition, Abbott Laboratories, Columbus, OH
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“One size doesn’t fit all families when it comes to the grandparents’ involvement. Each family finds a rhythm of time together and time apart.”

could let me get too close, so there was some tension.” Fortunately, that’s no longer the case. “It took effort, but I talked openly with my son and daughter-in-law about how I wanted to be present, and a lot of good came from those discussions,” Slon adds. She now spends two or three days each month at their house, and more time



when needed. “Although it would be lovely if we lived closer to each other, this rhythm works for me,” she says.

Which brings us to the Third and Fourth Commandments of Grandparenthood: communicate, and accept that one size does not fit all. Every family needs to find its own rhythm of togetherness and time apart. For example, when my sister-in-law’s first grandchild was born two years ago, she vowed to see him once a month even though she lives in New York and the little boy, who has since gained a baby sister, lives all the way in Kentucky. But this arrangement has worked well for all concerned. And I have one friend who has gone into semiretirement in order to babysit three afternoons a week for her new granddaughter. Another friend has moved from Minneapolis to Kansas City—giving up a tenured teaching post along the way—to help her daughter take care of three young children.

But not all grandparents are the hands-on type. Florence Falk, who lives across town from granddaughter Juliet, volunteers to babysit once every other weekend or so—when she’s not traveling. “I’m a zealous grandmother,” she explains, “but I work hard and have a strong commitment to my own active life.” What’s more,

she adds, “It’s critical for women to maintain their sense of identity and not become dependent on their grandchildren for fulfillment. As with children, grandchildren grow up and lead their own separate lives.”

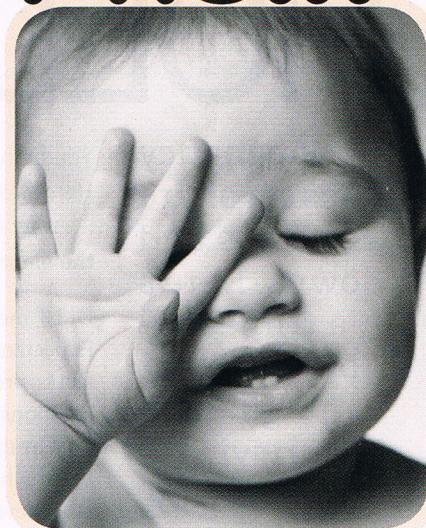
In my experience, I’ve learned that even when grandparents and adult children talk through their hopes and expectations—as I did with my son and daughter-in-law shortly before Isabelle was born—the game can change in a heartbeat. At the time of our conversation, Clay and Tamar were living about a mile from my husband and me in Washington, D.C., and they happily accepted my offer to babysit one or two afternoons a week. I was thrilled too—until a few months later when they moved to Paris for my son’s work.

Now, when I’m winging my way across the Atlantic, which I do about every three months, I’m grateful that after my initial grief over their sudden departure, I’ve been able to embrace the Fifth Commandment, and that is: let go of all your preconceived notions, and get ready to roll with the punches. There’s (almost) always a silver lining.

In my case, Paris.

Barbara Graham’s granddaughter is now 20 months old.

Phew.★



★ **TRANSLATION:** Wow, Mom, I’m so glad you switched to Similac Sensitive™ formula. You know I have a sensitive tummy, and this is much easier to digest.† You said Similac Sensitive is specially made with a unique blend of carbohydrates for less fussiness and gas.† Did you find that out when you went on www.similac.com to learn how to solve my feeding issues? (Sorry you had to log on at 3 a.m. when your hair was looking all funny. But I’m glad you did.) And Similac Sensitive has stuff to help me be strong, like DHA and ARA for my brain. Now that I feel better, I think I’ll practice laughing.

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 †For babies like me with lactose sensitivity.
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