

Grandparenting in the 21st Century

by Eileen Beal

The birth of your first grandchild – usually somewhere in your late 40s or early 50s – is a life-altering event. The child’s birth doesn’t just add a new branch to the family tree, it changes the family dynamic and your role in the family: No longer are you just mom or dad, you’re nana or papi, too.

Most first-time grandparents don’t realize the degree or significance of the changes that come with becoming grandparents – or the steep (and sometimes turbulent) learning curve that comes with grandparentdom. “[First-time grandparents] focus on the pregnancy and the birth, and they don’t think about how things are going to be long term,” explained nurse Kathy Yoder, coordinator of the Childbirth Education Program at Hillcrest Hospital in Mayfield Heights.

Communication is key

That failure to look at things long term usually manifests itself – sometimes heatedly – in three areas: differences about parenting styles, expectations, and boundaries. Citing an instance where a couple had expected the grandparents to babysit on Saturday nights, Yoder said: “Conflicts are most likely to occur because the new parents and the new grandparents haven’t made time to communicate, or have not communicated clearly, what their expectations are for each other...When there is a new baby, everyone needs to be on the same page.”

Grandparents, Yoder added, “must learn how to negotiate things in a supportive, encouraging and helpful way.”

The situation gets even more complicated when the new parents are dealing with three or four sets of grandparents. “That happens,” Yoder said, “more than you’d think.”

Start off on the right foot

One of the easiest ways to start off on the right foot as a new grandparent is to head back to the classroom for tips and tricks about grandparenting in the 21st century. In classes, you aren’t just learning everything from how to position an infant seat in your car to how to position an infant in a crib – “*Never* on their stomach,” said Yoder – you are learning from your peers, too. Citing the sense of empowerment that a class can give grandparents, Yoder said there is usually someone in a class who asks the questions everyone else is too embarrassed to ask or that they don’t think to ask.

Some hospitals (including Hillcrest) offer classes that are specifically designed for grandparents. Most, however, simply offer new baby classes – covering basic care and feeding, infant massage, newborn safety and health, etc. – that anyone who’s going to be welcoming a new baby into their life can benefit from.

Classes may also be offered through community Adult Education Departments or other community organizations. For instance, most community fire departments offer sessions for residents on the proper installation of infant seats. A call to the American Heart Association (877-242-4277) will put you in touch with a local program that teaches CPR (coronary pulmonary resuscitation) for infants and toddlers. If you can't find a community program, you can order the Infant CPR Anytime ® Program kit. "It contains a DVD, infant CPR manikin, and skill reminder guides...and it's an excellent baby shower gift," said John Molnar, manager of the CPR/Community Training Program at the Cleveland Clinic.

If there's no time for classes, or you want to add to knowledge gained in a class, Yoder suggested diving into *The Essential Grandparent*, by Lillian Carson, MD; *101 Ways to Spoil Your Grandchild*, by Vicki Lansky; and *Totally Cool Grandparenting* by Leslie Linsley. "All," said Yoder, "are excellent reads."

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