

## Grandparent Visitation Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.

Things to consider:

- Grandparents shouldn't take sides if they want to be helpful to their grandchildren. They can provide respite, escape, explanations, financial help, and caring. Those are very big and very important roles that can make them critical players in their grandchildren's lives for years to come.
  - By providing financial assistance, vacation homes, money, baby-sitting, chauffeur service, or a place to live, grandparents help families bridge the awful emotional and financial gaps that result from divorce.
  - In the unfortunate situation where a divorce leaves one or both parents uninvolved with the children, overly committed to work, or departed in pursuit of other romantic relationships, grandparents can provide the caring all children need and deserve.
  - Grandparents can open new lines of communication or serve as critical intermediaries. This is easier to accomplish if a strong attachment to the son-in-law or daughter-in-law balances the instinctive reaction to side with their own progeny.
  - Grandparents who exclusively defend one parent or engage in character assassination of either or both parent create loyalty conflicts for their grandchildren.
  - Occasionally, grandparents unintentionally displace their own child as a parent. This generates feelings of antagonism and incompetence in that child and confusion in the grandchildren.
  - Grandparents are for many children the ideal individuals to help them gain perspective and maintain a sense of humor so that the divorce, while momentous, doesn't become as scarring and limiting as it would otherwise have been.
  - **Grandparents should find alternative ways to continue the relationship with the grandchildren. Write letters, call and let the kids know you're part of their support network. And never, never make them feel they have an emotional conflict of interest. Even if you have to bite your tongue when you say something nice about the children's parent, do it because you're doing it for the good of the child.**
  - Open the lines of communication with the parents. Perhaps a mediator will be helpful. Often, visitation is not being denied because the parent thinks that contact with the grandparents will be harmful for the children, but that the parent fears that the grandparent will talk to the children about him or her in an adverse way. Discuss with the parent some ground rules for visitation, and whatever rules are agreed upon, follow them.
  - If there is animosity between you and the children's parents, do everything you can to keep the youngsters from getting involved in it.
  - **Remember that grandparent visitation is not intended to supersede parental visits or parental authority. Grandparents should step in only when there is a threat to the children's safety.**
- Tips for Parents and Grandparents from Dr. Kornhaber:**
- Never completely banish a parent or grandparent from the life of a child.

- When conflict occurs, concentrate on getting rid of the problems--not the people. And use every option to do so, including professional help.
- Many of the attitudes and situations leading to parent-grandparent problems are temporary. People grow and change. Forgiveness is important. Research shows that many parents eventually regret having separated their children from their grandparents. Parent-grandparent alienation is painful for all and rips apart the fabric of the family. Find another way.
- It is a terrible example for children when parents do not let them see their grandparents. Indeed, it hurts the parent-child relationship too. Children become insecure and afraid of their parents. Many wonder if their own parents will get rid of them too if they are not "good". Additionally, children have to lead a double life when they love their grandparents. They are afraid to tell their own parents they love and miss their grandparents for fear their parents will be angry with them.
- Many children reconcile with their grandparents as soon as they come of age.
- Children need both their parents and grandparents. We tell feuding parents and grandparents that they have to love the child more than they love the anger they feel toward one another. Rarely should the grandparent-grandchild bond ever be permanently ruptured. Parents should know that research shows that grandparents rarely inflict the conflicts and problems on grandchildren that they may have inflicted on their children. Growing up is a good teacher.