

What to Do When You Clash with Your Kid's Grandparents About COVID-19

Experts say it's common for family members to have differing opinions about how best to protect kids from the COVID-19 pandemic, but it's best to clearly state your boundaries and stick to them. Getty Images

- As parents work to protect their families from COVID-19, they may find grandparents unwilling to adhere to the boundaries being set.
- 15 percent of people have unfriended family members on social media due to COVID-19 disagreements.
- Parents need to know they can't control their children's grandparent's behavior, but they can set and enforce their own boundaries.
- Open, honest communication is the most important factor in maintaining strong family bonds through this, even as individual members may disagree on various COVID-19 safety measures.

All data and statistics are based on publicly available data at the time of publication. Some information may be out of date. Visit our [coronavirus hub](#) and follow our [live updates page](#) for the most recent information on the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sheila Kenyon lives in Minnesota with her husband and 4-year-old son. She was treated with radiation last year for multiple brain tumors and is

currently undergoing treatment for post-thrombotic syndrome as well as being evaluated for lupus.

Because of her complex medical situation, Kenyon told [name removed], “My family has been very COVID-aware and following all rules and recommendations

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put out by the CDC.”

They leave the house only for essentials, use grocery delivery and drive-up options whenever possible, and even remove clothing and shower immediately upon returning home.

However, not everyone in Kenyon’s extended family is being so careful.

“My mom is not cautious from what I can tell living many states away,” Kenyon said of her mother in Arizona. She continues to attend indoor church services, spends time with friends, and has even allowed out-of-state visitors to stay in her home.

And now, Kenyon’s mom is insisting on coming to Minnesota to visit Kenyon and her family.

“I have already said no, but she said she is coming and will be seeing us,” she said.

For Kenyon, the strain created by this conflict has been difficult. But according to a recent survey that found 15 percent of respondents had unfriended a family member on social media due to COVID-19 disagreements, she’s not alone in battling these uncomfortable dynamics.

Disagreements about COVID-19 safety is common for many families right now

“This is not uncommon,” Alex Ribbentrop, LCSW-QS, told [name removed]. “Especially because all of this is anxiety-provoking and/or stress inducing.”

Ribbentrop is a licensed psychotherapist and certified family trauma professional. He’s the founder of Live Free Psychotherapy and his expertise is in treating family systems and intergenerational trauma.

Ribbentrop explained, “When anxiety and stress are at play, generally we default to our earliest and often most ineffective defense mechanisms. This results in all or nothing thinking, compartmentalization, and other defenses that make meaningful and reciprocal communication that much more difficult.”

The result? Families at war over how to best handle our current pandemic.

In situations like Kenyon's, Ribbentrop said that honesty really is the best policy.

"This does not mean be rude or disrespectful, this simply means sharing how you feel and why," he said.

He suggests parents talk to their extended family members about the rules for safety they have set in their home, and the expectations they have for anyone who comes into contact with their children at this time.

But he also pointed out that while parents can set expectations, they can't control other people's behavior.

"Your job is not to convince anyone, your job is to communicate clearly, keep your side of the street clean, and take care of your children, spouse, or partner as best you can. At that point, it is up to the other party to digest that information and communicate effectively or not," he said.

What can a parent do if grandparents aren't willing to comply with the rules they've set?

Dawn Friedman, MEd, is a family counselor in private practice in central Ohio. She said that after parents have explained their boundaries, the rest is up to the grandparents to either follow through or choose their own path.

“If grandma still wants to go to her book club at the neighbors’, that’s her right,” Friedman said. “But it also means that parents should feel free to cancel an upcoming visit.”

“The important thing is that everyone keeps talking so that no one is taking greater risks than feels comfortable for them,” she said.

Friedman added that parents should remember they get to make their own decisions about how best to handle this, including creating boundaries if the other party isn’t being as safe as you’re comfortable with.

“This is difficult,” Ribbentrop said. “However, if you are taking into consideration the most recent scientific evidence to inform your decision and are concerned for the safety of your family, it is reasonable that your decision be informed by these factors.”

If parents have done their best to communicate their safety expectations to grandparents, and the grandparents are still choosing to engage in a way that goes against public health guidance, parents may need to reconsider the frequency of future visits, or restrict those visits to video calls for the time being.

“It’s a valid decision when the grandparents’ behavior no longer feels safe to the parents,” Friedman said. “This is true in non-COVID times, too. It’s not punishment when we hold people accountable to honor our boundaries.”

However, this isn’t a decision that parents should make lightly.

Ribbentrop pointed out that resentment may emerge if grandparents feel decisions are being made unfairly. And in family systems where there had previously been strong connections, this can be especially painful to deal with.

Continued communication is key

In the midst of these conflicts, it might feel natural to shut down and simply cut the opposing family member out.

But Ribbentrop said that open communication is more important now than ever — especially for families who may have a history of unhealthy conflict resolution.

“Honest and open communication is often the most difficult thing to do when conflict emerges. However, it provides you with the greatest chance for a lasting resolution,” Ribbentrop said. “It also allows you to set an example for your family and your children in terms of healthy communication.”

Friedman also pointed out that most families are on edge right now, and many of us are defensive about our choices.

“Grandparents often think their adult children overreact to things they weren’t concerned about when they were raising kids,” she explained, giving the example of car seats and the fact that many grandparents don’t appreciate how the rules have changed. “But it’s the parents’ right to make decisions that feel safe and comfortable for them, even if grandparents don’t like it.”

She said she sees this as a boundary issue, not a COVID-19 issue.

“If a grandparent chooses to go to the neighborhood potluck knowing it means they won’t be seeing their grandchild, that’s their choice,” she said. “Parents should be clear about their expectations and not punitive when enforcing rules.”

However, she pointed out that setting boundaries typically works best when it’s discussed calmly without escalating the situation further.

You can accomplish this with simple, clear wording such as: “I explained our COVID socialization rules to you last month. Unfortunately, because you went to your book club, we won’t be able to see you until you’ve completed two weeks of quarantine. We hope we’ll all be able to get together soon.”

If your parent then begins to raise their voice or tries to fight you on this decision, simply remind them that your boundaries have been clearly expressed and aren't up for discussion.

It's your right to end the conversation if they refuse to engage with you in the same calm manner you're trying to maintain.

Seek support for the choices you're making about your safety

For her part, Kenyon is still struggling to see eye-to-eye with her mother in this new reality.

"My mom's choices regarding COVID have created some tension in our relationship," she explained.

"I wish my mom would realize that all the nonessential things she is doing creates a large impact not only on her community, but also the world at large," she said. "It also makes people like me have to stay in shelter much longer, have procedures done with no support, and makes me stress if it's okay for my child to go to school."

When families are struggling with this level of disconnect, Ribbentrop said it's important to seek support.

“Don’t wait for there to be some irreparable problem or situation before asking for help. There are an abundance of people and resources available to help and it can make all the difference for you and your family and children,” he said.

In the meantime, Kenyon wants other parents at odds with grandparents over COVID-19 safety to know: “There are people in your court, you are not alone.”

“Do what you are comfortable doing and what makes you feel safe,” she added. “The people who love and support you through your decisions will be there for you when you are comfortable, waiting with open arms and hugs.”