

Who's in charge anyways?

It's not uncommon to find parents and grandparents living together with everyone minding the young. In fact, by many cultures, this is a very normal situation that works well for everyone. It tends to work best when everyone knows his or her place and it is clear who is responsible for what.

For other families the choice for parents and grandparents to live together may be less culturally determined. The situation may be to provide financial or social support either for parents or grandparents and sometimes both. Neither party may feel the situation is by choice, but by necessity.

In some of these cases, care of the young can become a battle between parents and grandparents.

Grandparents may overstep their bounds or feel the parents are inadequate. Parents may feel the grandparents are intrusive or worse, harsh or abusive. Having to rely on each other financially and/or a poor history between parents and grandparents may keep either from addressing concerns forthrightly. Both may be concerned that if they upset the applecart, all will lose something either financially or supportively. Over time tensions may escalate and the conflict may spill over into the care of the young. The young may learn to play parents and grandparents against each other or in other situations may be subject to inappropriate care themselves by either parents or grandparents.

In the 1970 and 1980's there was a style of family therapy that concentrated on these kinds of family problems and was known as structural family therapy. A basic tenet of structural family therapy was that families are organized in a hierarchy and that stepping outside the natural family hierarchy can give rise to distress. In other words, parents should parent, grandparents should support at the discretion of the parents. Indeed even when parents are inadequate, when grandparents step in uninvited, problems and conflicts tend to escalate.

The challenge in these situations is to come up with a set of rules between parents and grandparents that clearly stipulate roles, responsibilities and acceptable child rearing practices. In family therapy terms this is partly referred to as boundary formation.

Families unable to negotiate a set of rules themselves are advised to meet with an experienced family therapist. The role of the therapist is to understand and honour the family as a whole, including their living arrangements and then to help them arrange themselves so that it is clear who is responsible for what and what is acceptable with regard to the care of the young.

The process may be intimidating for some families, however the rationale makes it worthwhile. Families attend counselling for the good of the young. Children need parents and grandparents to have clear boundaries so they can operate within the family rules too. Children find safety and security when family rules and boundaries are clear and this reflects in happier, better-behaved kids.

Setting good boundaries doesn't mean grandparents cannot have authority, but their authority is best delivered and observed when provided forthrightly by the parents. Where parents are struggling and grandparents can offer appropriate support it may be wise to accept it in the interest of the young. Similarly grandparents who have a tendency to overstep their bounds are cautioned because this behaviour can bring distress to the family. The one thing neither parents or grandparents seem to want is conflict. This is often a good starting point for dialogue, with or without a family therapist.

Gary Direnfeld, MSW, RSW
(905) 628-4847
gary@yoursocialworker.com
www.yoursocialworker.com

Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report. Call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. Services include counselling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.