

Grandma Doesn't Live Here Anymore

By Donald Kern, MFT

"Grandma doesn't live here anymore." I listened as the mother told her eight year old son. "She's gone to live with a group of friends in a big hotel." The child stood there thoughtful.

This scene is reenacted every year with thousands of families across the country. The mother was caught in the dilemma of explaining to her child why his grandma, his beloved Nana, is not at home in her apartment, the place they've often visited . "Where is Grandma?" he asks. A sense of confusion is seen on his face. He is not alone.

The mother, also, is having to deal with an uncertainty new to her. Every year, more families find themselves in the dilemma of how to deal with aging parents, now becoming frail and in need of care. While finding their way through the ever increasing complexities of parenting young children in the fast paced 2000s, they are also faced with the decline of their parents.

Often they are caught unprepared for the task of arranging for the care of aging parents. Issues never dealt with before come back to haunt them. Perhaps they are dealing with parents with whom they may never have had a particularly close relationship. In contrast, perhaps they have difficulty in separating themselves from parents with whom they have had a close relationship, and who have now begun to show signs of early dementia. All these situations can tax the stability of a family.

That decline raises the issue of who is the parent and who is the child. This quandary is a role reversal.

Role reversal can mean taking a parent to a doctor's appointment, acting as his/her advocate, or taking charge of the purse strings. Adult children find themselves in the position of having to step in and take charge of a life, which may be beginning to unravel. Not only has this dilemma become "The Sandwich Generation," but the ingredients of the sandwich aren't even familiar nor particularly palatable.

The dilemma of role reversal is not just confined to adult children. The whole family is affected. Children growing up in a home with aging grandparents may have to look after their grandparent's safety or serve meals in their rooms. They may at a young age take on the role of caregiver.

So, how do families cope with role reversal? Are there guidelines one can follow? To minimize the sense of loss that often accompanies the decline of vitality in older adults, one needs to prepare both, legally and emotionally. Preparation often means coming to terms with the inevitable, recognizing that issues exist, and knowing that one is not alone.

▣ Children's Loss

Younger children often experience sadness at the decline of a grandparent. Activities they used to share may no longer be possible. Children may not understand and they may become confused, perhaps blaming themselves for this loss of closeness. They want their grandparent back along with the familiar. They may be frightened at the changes in their grandparent. Grandparents are experiencing anger and frustration at their own loss of independence. Children should be encouraged to express their feelings by writing them down, or, if too young to write, to draw pictures or to talk about them. Parents need to explain to children they should not take the chance in relationship nor the statements their grandparents make, which may be personally hurtful. Things need to make sense to children and should be explained simply, in terms they can understand. Children must be reassured they are not responsible for this state of affairs and, in fact, can be helpful by giving love and reassurance.

An analogy between a grandparent and a favorite toy, which has become old, but is still prized, may be helpful. Although changed with age, both a grandparent and toys may still be held, hugged, and loved.

It is a difficult balancing act for parents to encourage teenagers to participate in decisions and care giving, while not expecting them to display maturity beyond their years. Normalizing their fears can help teenagers grapple with issues that have no clear, unequivocal answer. This challenge can be an introduction to sharing feelings in pursuit of a family plan to care for a loved one as well as confronting fears about dying and their need to include a caregiver in the future.

While working in a long-term care facility, I worked with a family in the throes of moving their elderly parent to skilled nursing. While meeting with the family, it came to light that the grandparent was strongly attached to the family pet, a cocker spaniel named Golda. The youngest grandchild asked if he could take Golda to Grandma's room. While visitation rules are sometimes strict, I could think of no reason not to let the animal visit. The grandmother was delighted. This began a new period of acceptance by family and loved one. It was clear that Golda's visits were instrumental in healing the family crisis. Sometimes the solution is very simple.

▣ All Have Fears

Adult children and sandwich generations often mirror their children's fears, only they have the additional burden of family leadership. The ability to come to clear decisions and respond with wisdom escapes them. They have to deal with the sadness of a parent's decline, the fears of identifying with aging parents, and juggling all of this rage along with "having a life." Having to uproot parents and change the family equilibrium, taking over leadership from parents who have been their superiors, causes many wrenching feelings. While taking charge, there may be the counterpoint of personal doubt and a sense that what they are doing seems incredibly arrogant.

Dealing with role reversal involves accepting the inevitability of parents' aging and passing. Sometimes, this role reversal means in our hearts grieving and letting go. Knowing that we have to cope with key issues is the first step toward creating a game plan to handle role reversals.

Knowing what to say to a child comes from inner acceptance. When we feel and see the world through the eyes of our children, their fears become our fears. Such is the dilemma of families coping with change.

What everyone needs to remember is that while Grandma may not live here anymore, she is still a prized member of the family and a link to the continuity of life. Connection comes from feeling free enough to allow others in, our children on the one hand, our parents on the other. In the end, we do our best.

About the Author

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