

Through the eyes of a child

Grandparents raising grandchildren



Understanding children's behaviors

Children who've experienced major life changes often react in new and unfamiliar ways. Trying to understand their behaviors and respond in the best fashion can be difficult. This fact sheet explains some of the reasons for behavior problems and suggests ways to work through them. It also identifies common behavior problems and those that may need professional intervention.

Concerns about children's behaviors

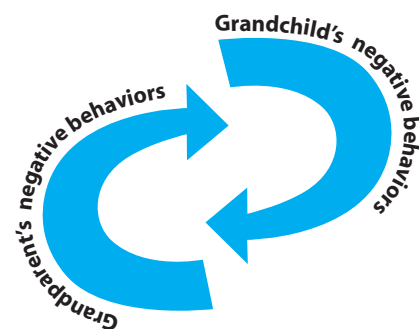
Grandparents often worry about their grandchildren's behaviors and how to manage them. Children's problem behaviors occur for many different reasons. Some of these reasons can happen as:

- A response to an event
- A response to another person
- A way to communicate
- A way to express feelings
- A way to get attention
- A way to divert attention from other problems

It is important to understand that a child's behaviors happen in certain situations. As the child's caregiver, how you respond to these behaviors is important. You can:

- Try to help the child change the behaviors
- Try to understand the event(s) that led to the behaviors
- Try to understand what message the child is trying to communicate
- Try to understand the child's feelings
- Try to understand the context in which the behaviors occur

Young children like having a routine and understanding. They respond to a caregiver's positive and negative actions and feelings. If caregivers respond to children's behaviors with punishment, negative cycles can start.



Common behavior problems

Children who are placed in kinship and foster care are going through a lot of life changes. They are more likely than children raised by their natural parents to show the following problems:¹

- Strong fears
- Withdrawal
- Depression
- Unusual friendliness to strangers
- Trouble developing important and healthy relationships
- Extreme stress and/or trauma from an experience, which could include painful memories
- Eating and sleeping problems
- Delays in development or acting younger than their age

The good news is that these problems respond to treatment.

Warning signs of serious behavior problems

Some behaviors that grandchildren engage in can hurt the child and others around them. Grandparents should seek professional help if their grandchild exhibits any of the following behaviors:

- Hurting or talking of hurting oneself, other people, or animals
- Withdrawing for a long time and showing no interest in activities and other people
- Not eating for several days at a time
- Sleeping too much
- Too much interest in violent materials

- Major problems in school or day care
- Setting fires or talking about setting fires
- Acting out sexually
- Threatening other people
- Lying or stealing

These behaviors may be a child's way of asking for help. They may be signs that a child has a problem that needs to be treated and that won't just go away on its own.

Suggestions for responding

When children experience major life changes, they may behave in challenging ways or they may have trouble interacting with others. You need to know that:²

1. Children who are cared for by people other than their parents sometimes act out, making it hard for a grandparent to be kind and gentle. A child may turn away when a grandparent tries to comfort him or her.
2. You need to understand the child's needs and continue to be comforting and nurturing even if the child pushes you away. Don't get angry.
3. You may not feel like being kind and gentle when a child is upset and pushes you away. But you should continue being positive and supportive. This is when the child needs you the most.
4. Children who can't control their feelings or behaviors under stress need your help to change. You can help by listening to the child, letting the child have some time alone, or finding professional help for the child.

Caregivers in these situations often look for help and support.

Where to go for help

If you're worried about your grandchild or are feeling overwhelmed yourself, there are many sources of support available:

- Talk to a trusted friend who is not directly involved in the situation
- Talk to your grandchild's teacher or day care provider
- Talk to your grandchild's pediatrician or family doctor
- Talk to your pastor, rabbi, priest, or spiritual counselor
- Join a support group for grandparents raising grandchildren



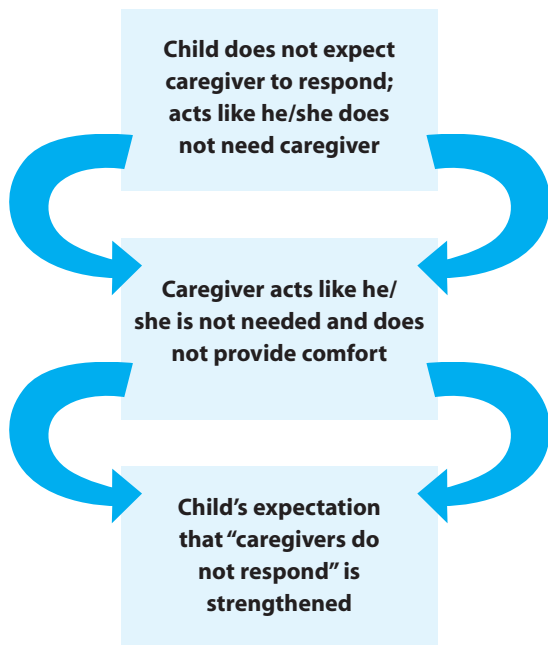
- Contact your kinship care worker
- Contact your county Extension office
- Contact a licensed psychologist, psychiatrist, or social worker in your area
- Contact a child welfare agent
- Call a parental stress hotline
- Contact your local early intervention program
- Look for respite care
- Contact your local aging office
- Contact your local Family Resource Center

Parenting styles

As the main caregiver for your grandchild, you play an important role in managing your grandchild’s behaviors. You must provide the child with a safe and secure environment. You also need to respond to the child’s needs and look after the child’s healthy development.

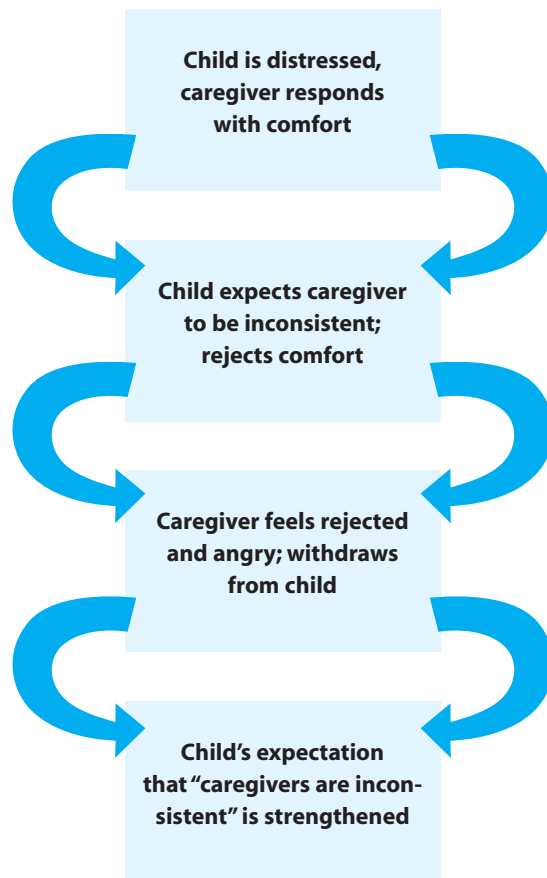
One way of evaluating parenting styles looks at the amount of warmth and the amount of control, or structure, used when raising children.³ The diagram on the next page identifies each style—what the caregiver does and how children typically respond. Remember that each child is unique and will respond in his or her own way. Certainly, not all children with parents who have high amounts of control and warmth will become independent and responsive.

When a child is distressed but rejects comfort:



Your responses can affect your grandchild’s expectations of relationships. The following graphics show how a negative reaction can reinforce problem behaviors.

When a child does not appear to need comfort:



Summary of parenting styles

High warmth/high control. The caregiver is in control, but is warm and loving. This style is considered best for the healthy development of the child. Children raised with this parenting style are often thoughtful, respectful, and independent.

High warmth/low control. The caregiver has little control over the child, but is very warm and loving. Without structure and supervision, children may develop behavior problems. Children may break rules and lack structure in their lives.

Low warmth/high control. The caregiver is controlling, but not very warm or sensitive. The caregiver often expects too much from children. Parents who abuse their children often fall under this category. In response, children often become aggressive and controlling.

Low warmth/low control. The caregiver provides little or no structure or supervision for the child and little or no warmth or sensitivity. The caregiver is often neglectful or absent. Children raised this way often have difficulty showing warmth for others.

Culture and parenting strategies

Children’s behaviors are guided by culture. Good behavior in one culture may be considered bad behavior in another culture. Ways of parenting and disciplining children vary in different cultures. What is good parenting in one culture may be poor parenting in another culture. In the United States, for example, many families value independence and a strong will. These characteristics are seen in children who help make decisions and express their feelings to others. In many Eastern countries, children are expected to be obedient and to respect authority figures. The parenting styles in each culture will focus on raising children to meet cultural standards.

Parenting styles and children’s typical responses

high control		low control		
Parenting style	Child’s response	Parenting style	Child’s response	
high warmth	Very responsive to the child’s needs	Responds to others in a positive, social way	Very responsive to the child’s needs	Often unmotivated; lacks self-discipline and direction
	Rational in rule setting, but expects child to follow rules	Independent thinker	Has little control over child’s behaviors	Has difficulty making thoughtful decisions
	Respects child’s point of view	Uses reason to solve complicated problems	Allows child to set rules	Sees authority figures as equal to themselves
	Guides child’s independence	Respectful of authority Interactions with others are positive, healthy	Does not demand that rules set by adult be followed	
low warmth	Very demanding of child	Aggressive and hostile towards others	Not responsive to child’s needs	Lacks direction and motivation
	Not responsive to child’s needs	Makes rash decisions	Fails to set rules or limits on child’s behaviors	Unable to make clear decisions
	Expects obedience from the child, using forceful measures to accomplish goals	Responds poorly to others’ feelings	Does not communicate desires or expectations to the child	Responds poorly to authority figures
	Child not allowed to help make decisions or express point of view	Constant need to be in control		

Questions to ask yourself

- How do I feel when the child cries? What is going through my mind? Do I feel nurturing or bothered? Loving or angry?
- How does the child act when it seems like he or she should be feeling afraid, unsure, or in need of protection?
- When I offer comfort to the child, how does he or she react? How does this make me feel?
- When the child acts in a negative way, how do I react? What message am I giving the child with my actions?
- What could I do differently to make things better?
- Am I getting the support I need to respond in a nurturing way to the child?

References

- ¹ Clyman, R.B., B.J. Harden, and C. Little. Assessment, Intervention, and Research with Infants in Out-of-Home Placement. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 23:435-453, 2002.
- ² Dozier, M., E. Higley, K.E. Albus, and A. Nutter. Intervening with Foster Infants' Caregivers: Targeting Three Critical Needs. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 23:541-554, 2002.
- ³ Bornstein, M.H. (ed.). *Handbook of Parenting, Volume 5: Practical Issues in Parenting*, 2nd edition. Mahway, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002.



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This fact sheet is part of a series. To obtain the rest of the set, visit the University of Wisconsin-Extension grandparenting web site at www.uwex.edu/relationships/. For more information about this series, contact Mary Brintnall-Peterson, University of Wisconsin-Extension or Julie Poehlmann, University of Wisconsin-Madison.