

The Grandparent Guide: Limit-Setting for Little Ones



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime

by Kathy Kinsner

Grandparents play a major role in raising the next generation. **Did you know that grandparents provide care for 24% of kids under 5 years old while their parents work?** If you're a grandma or grandpa in this role, you've probably noticed that a lot remains the same from one generation to the next. You're already an expert at raising young children—you know how to rock babies to sleep, to kiss boo-boos, and to share a good story. But you've probably also noticed that a few things have changed since you were a parent. Here's the latest news on limit-setting for young children.



The Latest on Spanking

To spank or not to spank? This might have been a question you thought about when your own kids were young. Although taking care of a young child can sometimes be challenging, experts say the best answer is “no spanking.” Here's why: Spanking may appear to work in the moment. It can get a child's attention and get him to stop what he's doing. But it teaches other lessons, too: About big people having power over little ones, and about aggression being acceptable in our relationships with others.

It's also very difficult to teach kids the importance of self-control, patience, and kindness when spanking is in the mix. Little ones are watching our every move, and are confused when adults say “no hitting” but do it themselves.

What Works Instead

- **Know that nothing works every time.** As a parent yourself, you remember how long it takes for children to learn about self-control, family rules, and how to share. Taking a moment to pause before responding to your grandchild's challenging behavior can give you time to find the best response. We know more than ever before about the rapid pace of development going on in a young child's brain, but this learning still takes time!

- **Know what's appropriate at each age.** There's often a [big disconnect](#) between the behavior that adults expect and what little kids are actually capable of doing. In fact, children don't develop self-control until 3½ to 4 years old! Toddlers are still learning how to control their bodies, actions, and words.
- **You may find you're more patient than you were with your own kids,** partly because you have the wisdom and perspective that comes with watching children grow into adulthood. If you (or your adult children) need a refresher on what's happening at each age, check out our [month-by-month guides](#).
- **Let kids know you're on their side.** You've got lots of experience with how the world works, words to describe things, and coping skills your grandkids don't yet have. Help cushion their frustrations and disappointments by letting them know you understand how they feel. "I know you're sad to leave the playground, but it's getting dark and it's time for dinner."
- **Plan ahead.** Think about what the trouble spots in the day are likely to be and plan around them. Kids (and adults) are more likely to act out when they're tired, hungry, or waiting a long time with nothing to do. Plan ahead about how you'd like to handle situations that are often difficult for young children like waiting for the bus (bring storybooks) or leaving the park (pack a snack for the walk home).
- **Keep calm, and carry on.** Your grandchild is looking to you to keep it together when she's falling apart. She needs you to be her calm, steady rock when she feels overwhelmed. When you need to talk about her behavior, get down on her level and speak calmly and kindly, using as few words as possible. "You must hold Grandma's hand. I don't want you to get hurt."

Research Says:

It's that true that many people who were spanked as children grow into well-adjusted, caring adults. But research shows that children who are spanked at 3 years old are more likely to be aggressive at 5—right as they are about to enter school. To help children succeed, using discipline strategies that teach about natural consequences and the impact of a child's behavior on others gets kids on the right path.

<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/125/5/e1057>

Your loving presence is a great gift to your grandchildren, as well as to their parents who are trusting you with their care. ZERO TO THREE has lots more [resources on discipline](#) to read and share. And be sure to check out our [other materials](#) created especially for grandparents.