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The ins and outs of dating—and marrying—a grandparent.

By Lambeth Hochwald

For single grandparents, dating often beats sitting alone. Playing the role of grandma's new beau, though, can be confusing...especially if you're on the path to matrimony. A grandparent's dating life can affect adult children and grandchildren in big ways, says clinical psychologist Nancy O'Reilly, leading a dating grandparent to wonder: How will the new grand fit in? Will he or she be accepted? When is the right time ♦ and what's the best way ♦ to present him or her? Here are tips for smoothing over first introductions and pulling step-grands into the family fold seamlessly.

Take & Give Cues

To avoid potential pitfalls, take your cues from the grandpa you're dating, suggests Susan Shapiro Barash, author of "Second Wives: The Pitfalls and Rewards of Marrying Widowers and Divorced Men." The perception he has of his grown children and grandchildren, and their readiness to meet his new life partner, counts greatly, says Barash. "If he says 'don't come to this event,'"she says, "respect and understand that your attendance may be a sensitive issue." Instead of pushing the matter, wait until he feels the timing is right.

Be Open with Family

A relationship takes two, and each of you should do your part to pave the way for a new partner to enter the family picture. Do your part by taking time to communicate with loved ones about your desire to find a companion. Even though this may seem like high school all over again, if you're getting serious with someone, communicate with your family—fast. "If you're widowed, dating is going to be more complicated because your late husband (dad or grandpa) is likely immortalized," says Barash.

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Approach your adult children directly, she says. Try saying something along the lines of: "I know you'll be happy to hear that I've had a few nice dinners with so-and-so. It's less lonely for me although I'll always miss your dad/grandpa." This way, when a family event comes up or it's time to introduce your new friend, your position is known and your family knows you expect their approval, says Barash.

Lend a Hand

If and when the relationship grows more serious, do what you can to become part of—and contribute to—the family unit. One way to endear yourself? Pitch in. "Find ways to be a support," suggests Emily Bouchard, a family coach and founder of www.blended-families.com. The step-grandmother of a seven-year-old, one-year-old, and nine-month-old suggests going over to the family house at a regularly scheduled time to give the parents a romantic outing. She values this time with her granddaughter. "We play 'white tornado' and tackle the kitchen or whatever area of the house needs extra attention," says Bouchard. "I give her freedom to wash the dishes in super-soapy water while I clean up around her." It's a win-win: Her granddaughter has fun and feels good making the house shine; Bouchard has one-on-one time with the little one and earns points helping her stepdaughter. One caveat: Bouchard always gains her stepdaughter's permission first.

Treat Steps like Blood

Ultimately, when it comes to grandparent/grandchild relations, the biggest challenge for step-grandparents can be to view the relationship through the eyes of the grandchild, says Donna Tonrey, a marriage and family therapist based in Philadelphia who directs a clinical counseling program at La Salle University. "Emotionally, children don't discern the difference between a biological and a marital connection. They see the step-grandparents as grandparents and want to be treated the same as the biological grandchildren." Too often, she adds, adults create different categories within the family and treat step-grandchildren differently. Therefore, adults in the family should make every attempt to rise to the occasion and treat all grandchildren equally.

Four tips for happy step-grandparenting



Sorry
grandma.
They want our
flippin' fudge!



Here, the [grandparents.com](https://www.grandparents.com) top four ways to get your relationship off to the best start possible and keeping it growing strong:

Decide on a Name

Be upfront with your step grandchildren. Put some thought time into figuring out what you'd like to be called, and communicate that name to your step-grandkids. Depending on how old they are, you may want to offer them options. Be careful, though, of making of making a simple thing needlessly complicated. Say "Please call me Joan or Mrs. Smith or something fun," suggests O'Reilly. "The grandchild will find a nickname sooner or later like Nana Joan or Papa George or something similar." What's key: Keep it simple and make the grandchild feel as comfortable with you as possible.

Reassure Biological Grandparents

Make friendly with the biological grandparents and let them know your intention is not to replace them or compromise their involvement. "Get to know one another," O'Reilly says. "Remember that you all want what is best for these children." You may even take the initiative by inviting them to a movie or out to dinner.

Be patient

Remember: It takes all of us some time to feel comfortable with a new person. "Don't try to rush things with your step grandchildren," says O'Reilly. "It may feel sometimes like you're taking one step forward and two steps back, but soon you will be making progress." Don't set yourself up for disappointment by setting unrealistic expectations of establishing tight bonds overnight.

Be available

Ask the grandkids how they're feeling and listen to what they say. "This transition isn't as easy as it looks," says O'Reilly. "Let these children come to you and, when they do, be sure to be ready for them."

The bottom line is that single grandparents don't have to go through life alone, or avoid dating because they're afraid of how their families may react. It just might take a little maneuvering at first to familiarize your loved one with the idea of someone new entering your life. Still, no matter how much planning goes into introductions, know that there

may be a certain amount of on-your-feet assimilation required. "If you're dating a grandparent, you may be placed immediately into a family structure and must learn to fit in," says O'Reilly. But even if grandkids are tentative with you at first, it is likely just a matter of time before they adore you just as much your partner does.



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