



PRACTICAL WAYS TO CREATE MEANING

Spoiling Grandkids: A Guide for Parents

Children benefit from relationships with grandparents, aunts and uncles and other extended family members. These relatives express love in many ways, including gift giving which some parents say can be excessive and difficult to manage. Finding ways to set limits and preserve relationships can be accomplished with clear, respectful, assertive communication skills. Assertive communication can work wonders in channeling well-meaning generosity for your child's benefit.

Avoid Blame—Using “I messages” is a communication tool that reduces the chances that grandparents will become defensive, increases the likelihood of problem solving and preserves relationships. You own your feelings and do not blame the other. Notice the difference between these two statements. Which feels blaming?

- A. *“You are always giving the children junk. What were you thinking?”*
- B. *“I am concerned that the children have too many toys.”*

The ‘A’ statements are examples of “you messages.” “You messages” blame and provoke arguments. The ‘B’ statement is an example of an “I message.” “I messages” allow the speaker to claim his/her own perspective without blaming the receiver. “I messages” often start with the words “I feel, I want, or I need . . .”

Notice the use of ‘I messages’ in this conversation opener:

“I would like to talk to you about something that is very important to me. I value our relationship and appreciate your generosity towards my children. I am concerned that the children have too many toys. I need your help to find ways to manage the amount of things my kids receive.”

Stay Calm Tone of voice, body language and choice of words all have an impact on the outcome of a conversation. When emotions rise in us, and in others, it is a signal that something important is being discussed. It is a good time to find common ground through a technique called “AIKIDO” communication. This 4-step tool helps restore harmony and begin solution seeking with overly generous grandparents and other relatives. Notice the “I messages” used in each step. Start with a deep breath to calm your body and collect your thoughts.

Step 1 Alignment – As a parent, put yourself in the grandparents’ shoes and see the situation from their perspective.

“I would want to feel special to my grandchildren.”

“I can see how fun it is for you to see joy in your grandchildren’s eyes.”

Step 2 Agree – Find common ground.

“I agree that we both love the children deeply and want the best for them.”

Step 3 Redirect – Move the conversation forward.

“I value our relationship and want to work this out together. Let’s find a time before the next holiday to talk about this.”

Step 4 Resolve – Begin the solution seeking with a suggested action step.

“I am confident we can find gift ideas for the children that will strengthen your bond with them and be manageable for our family. Let’s make a list of ideas and see what feels right for you and me.”

These 4 steps may smooth the way for some great problem solving.

Be Clear

If emotions are still running high or aggressive communication or behavior continues, allow time for everyone to calm down. Then you can use the following technique to be clear, respectful and assertive without compromising your needs.

The DESC communication technique helps to set clear expectations and reduce defensiveness. DESC is an acronym for **D**escribe, **E**xpress, **S**pecify, **C**onsequences. Pick one option from each step below or modify it to fit your situation. Then, follow the steps in order to maximize the results. Don’t try to tackle all the issues at once. Deliver your “speech” on one issue as if you are giving a report. Use an even tone of voice, calm facial expression, and be patiently persistent. Writing out what you want to say or practicing with a trusted friend before you talk to the grandparent can be helpful.

Step 1 - Describe the situation, stating your observations using ‘I messages’:

“I know you love my kids and want them to see you as their special (grandmother/aunt). I noticed that the gifts the children received for the holiday are (broken, ignored, not appropriate for their age/abilities, too many for our home).”

Step 2 - Express your feelings:

“I am concerned that (pick one of the following):

- *The toys go the landfill quickly.*
- *The children are overwhelmed and will not be able to use/appreciate these gifts.*
- *The child is not old enough yet.*
- *We do not have space to store/play with them.”*

OR

“I want my children to learn the value of (education, saving, working toward what they need, appreciating what they have, family relationships, etc.)”

Step 3 - Specify your needs:

“For future gift giving, I want the children to receive more gifts of time/experience/savings like:

- *special activity with the child*
- *family pass to zoo/pool/park/museum*
- *dance/music lessons, camp registration*
- *money (investment for college, savings bond, etc.)*
- *story-telling about your childhood”*
- *Choose more ideas at www.ReclaimYourHolidays.org*

OR

“I prefer that the children receive tangible gifts such as:

- *Practical items such as clothing, grocery/farmer’s market cards/coupons*
- *Needs or wants from a list created by the child*
- *Gifts that can stay at Grandma’s house to be enjoyed at sleep-overs, etc.*
- *Money (1/3 for saving, 1/3 for charity, 1/3 for spending)*
- *Open-ended toys that encourage thinking, imagination, movement. (See www.extension.iastate.edu for *“Understanding Children; Toys”* for age-appropriate toys.)*
- *A family heirloom and story.”*

Step 4 - Consequences result when what is specified (in step 3 above) occurs or does NOT occur.

“When the children receive gifts of time/experience/savings, then they:

- *Create a special bond with you.*
- *Enjoy the gift and are not overwhelmed.*
- *Learn important values of (education, saving, work, appreciation, family relationships, etc.)*
- *Will remember your generosity when they get older (you will provide a legacy).”*

OR

“When the children receive too many toys or things they cannot use, I will return or donate them.”

If at first you don't succeed at getting your family's needs met around gift giving practices, keep trying to communicate as positively as possible. Your child needs her extended family for support throughout her lifetime. Avoid communication that feels blaming and destroys relationships. Commit to assertive communication to preserve relationships and find positive solutions.

References:

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Prepared by Kristi Cooper, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, 2013, for Reclaim Your Holidays, a program of University of Northern Iowa Center for Energy and Environmental Education, in partnership with Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. Support for this project is provided by the Resource Enhancement and Protection Program (REAP) Conservation Education Program and Iowa Department of Natural Resources Solid Waste Alternatives Program Agreement Number 10-G550-41FL. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of IDNR. For more information, visit www.ReclaimYourHolidays.org.