



## Dealing With Your Family's Advice

As the holidays approach, many parents ask for advice on dealing with their family's... advice!

**When your child is unhappy in school,** as their parent you have to make tough choices. Perhaps the options available to you are not quite what you would have preferred. You might end up homeschooling reluctantly, sending your child to a private school that offers specialist provision, or moving house to access a school that's a better fit.

When we are thinking about making a major change like this, many of us ask our parents, siblings or close family members for advice first. We want to get lots of ideas and be able to weigh up the pros and cons of all our options. But it is safe to say that for many people – and probably for you if you are reading this guide – the advice we get back from family members is not always helpful, because it doesn't match what we personally believe and want.

This could be because we see the world in a different way from that person. It could be that **we have different values and priorities**. It could simply be that we have a better understanding of the problems we're trying to solve, because we live with them on a daily basis and have done a lot of research, and the other person hasn't.

Sadly, when a difference of opinion comes up, or when we receive advice that we didn't ask for, we can get angry with the other person or feel upset by them, and our relationship with them can be damaged.

By thinking about this in advance, **we can get prepared** for the issues that commonly come up. When we are prepared we are usually able to handle a difference of opinion – or receiving unwanted advice – without becoming upset, hostile, or defensive.

## Common Big Issues

**Some of the big issues that cause upset**, that we see parents talking about often, include:

- Grandparents telling parents they are being too “soft” and making their kid “naughty”, or an older relative raising an eyebrow saying “We didn't have ADHD/autism/dyslexia in my day.”
- Sibling rivalry playing out between adults in the yearly update, with children's school success held up as a parenting trophy.
- Family members asking about your child, “Why doesn't Jake come and sit at the table with everyone else?” or insisting “Come on Nina, join in the charades game with us, you're too serious!”

- Not being able to answer genuinely well-meaning questions like, “So how is Emily getting on in school these days?” (when Emily hasn’t gone in for three months and is on a waiting list for mental health support for depression), or “How are you enjoying your new school Sam?” (when Sam’s struggling with social anxiety at his new school because he was bullied at his last one).

## Get Prepared

**Here’s our 3-step plan for preparing yourself** for the “family visits” season:

**1. Make yourself reminders of these quotes**, and have them handy. Write them in your diary. Write them on a post-it note and stick to your laptop screen when you’re calling family. Carry them around in your purse or pocket, to look at when you take 5 in the bathroom to cool down after a particularly sharp encounter over the canapés.

<p>“Don’t let others who don’t understand your child’s struggles, make you doubt your parenting.” Natasha Daniels</p>	<p>If you are reading this, you are a GOOD PARENT.</p>
<p>NAIO: Not An INFORMED Opinion</p>	<p>This is not about me, or my child, it’s about their issues. I don’t need to engage with it.</p>
<p>“Kids do well if they can.” Dr Ross Greene (Note: the same applies to grandparents!)</p>	<p>I can always choose to smile politely and change the subject, or leave the room for a few minutes to find calm.</p>

**2. Make a list of all the hurtful or unhelpful things** you could imagine your family members saying to you, or to your child, on the phone or when you meet. They may have already said them, or you are worried they might say them. Write every single one out in a column on the left hand side of a sheet of paper, leaving space on the right. Now, in the right hand side, write down what you wish they would say instead. You must come up with at least one alternative thing they could say, that you would feel happy with, even if you can't imagine them ever saying it. If you get stuck, bring to mind a friend or a wise person in your life – it could be someone you've never met like an author you admire, or a public figure like the Dalai Lama or Nelson Mandela. What would they say instead? Now, think about how you would feel, to hear your family member say this to you or your child. Here are a few examples:

Grandma says to daughter: “Why aren't you playing your flute for us this time, Alisha? Did you give up on that too?”	Grandma says instead: “Oh Alisha, it's so lovely to see you again. What are you enjoying doing these days?”
Your sister says to you: “Did you try that new treatment my friend recommended for Joshua's autism? I heard it's really good, you should try it out with him.”	Your sister says instead: “Hey Joshua's looking well. I'm glad you could all come to dinner. Let me know if he needs a break from us, he can go play a game in Ed's room.”
Your mother in law complains: “I don't know why you took Annie out of regular school. She'll never have a hope of getting into college now.”	Mother in law says instead: “I looked up the school you chose for Annie, it looks like it's a really good fit for her. How's it working out so far?”

The next exercise follows on from this in more detail.

**3. The 5-3-9 exercise.** Suppose your family member was to behave in exactly the ways you would wish them to behave, that would make you and your child feel delighted, supported and appreciated. What 5 things would you see them doing, when you next meet? You can really go to town with this – be as funny or ridiculous as you like. You can wish for anything you would like. Then, close your eyes for a few moments and think about

how pleased that would make you feel. Write down 3 words to describe how you feel. Next, write down 9 things YOU would do in response, when that person did the 5 things you want them to do. Here's an example:

5 things they would do, that I would be pleased with:

1. Say something nice about what I'm wearing.
2. Welcome the children but not make them hug.
3. Offer a quiet space for the children to settle down.
4. Be thankful for the gifts and food we bring.
5. Not argue about the time we'll be leaving – accept it.

3 words to describe how this would make me feel:

1. Relieved
2. Pleasantly surprised!
3. Warmhearted

10 things I would do in response:

1. Smile when we arrive, even if journey was stressful.
2. Link arms with my husband going in.
3. Introduce the kids to strangers if they feel shy.
4. Remember to make sure the kids feel comfortable.
5. Comment on how nice the house looks.
6. Ask how they have been recently – and listen!
7. Compliment how nice the food is, even if it isn't.
8. Listen to great uncle Jim's stories with patience.
9. Gently ask the kids if they can say thank you when leaving, and if they can't, ask them for one thing they liked about the evening and say it on their behalf.

Here's the trick: when you see that person, do those 9 things, even if they are behaving appallingly.

**Having prepared yourself in advance**, you will find it much easier to behave in ways that accord with your values, even if that means instantly changing the subject when something unkind is said or an inappropriate question is asked.

If you are attending **with a supportive partner or spouse**, it will be helpful to go through this exercise together beforehand (your 5-3-9 answers might be very different to theirs) and to agree on a response plan for if the interactions start to go wrong. My husband and I have often prepared “code phrases” for when we need support, or can see the other starting to get upset and want to offer our support: “Do you want me to go and see if there’s any [X] in the kitchen?” or “Darling, before I forget, do you remember if we brought [Y] in from the car?”

**Should you partner or spouse be less supportive**, which sometimes happens in situations with in-laws present, you can do the 5-3-9 exercise on your own ahead of the event, using your partner or spouse as the “difficult person”. It really works.

**Family visits over the holidays are generally not a good time** to discuss or resolve any major issues around your child’s development or education, with other family members. There are just too many other stressful factors at play, and too many people in the room. A good solution, if you do want to talk about it with them, is to briefly mention it and say that you think it would be helpful if you could find a quiet time alone to talk it through, for example, when taking a walk outside, or having a dedicated phone call the next week.

We hope that some of these suggestions chime with you and make you **feel more confident** about preparing yourself for upcoming family events. Taking 20 minutes ahead of time to prepare, really can make a huge difference. Why not plan that time into your diary now, or put it on your “To Do” list for your holiday preparations? The sooner you feel you are taking the first steps to getting on top of this, the sooner you will start to feel lighter and more joyful about the holidays ahead.

Best wishes and season’s greetings,

Pascale

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