

Ask Pact

Our Family Doesn't Want Us To Adopt

Q: *My husband and I want to adopt. Most of our family is comfortable with our decision. One of the grandparents to be is not. We used to live in a large metropolitan area but now we now live in a small town. The grandparent is afraid that we (especially the child) will be ostracized. We also are concerned because if we don't follow this grandmother's advice, she might have a problem down the road bonding with our child, even though she says it's our decision. We think we can handle "bad" reactions from strangers but I'm concerned that having this issue in our family, which is supposed to be "safe," might be more than a child should have to deal with. Also, all our relatives live out of town. Any thoughts or advice would be appreciated.*

A: You are right, it is very important to consider the relationships that will be possible for your child with your extended family. What we have learned over time is that most grandparents start out feeling just like yours – adopting is a choice they would rather not see you make. Like many people, they have dreamed and imagined you having children and their assumption was that those grandchildren would come to them through being born to you, rather than through adoption. Like many adoptive parents, they have to readjust their thinking and vision to what is rather than what they thought would be. They love you and want to protect you from anything they perceive might be difficult and they are often concerned about what "the neighbors will think" to a far greater degree than you are. This is only natural. You are making a decision that they are not in control of but which will affect them in many ways.

Often members of the World War II generation (who may themselves have been direct victims of what the neighbors thought) may be more cautious because they learned not to trust outsiders – not to make themselves noticed, but rather to do everything they could to blend in with the dominant society. In other words adopting a child (particularly if the adoption is a visible one) may touch a lot of their buttons. If your family has a history of working out the difficulties that arise among members (the kind of families who stick together no matter what) you can imagine that this grandparent will find a way to accept and love this child because the risk of losing their relationship with you would be too great. If you come from a family, on the other hand, that has a history of estrangement – i.e.,

people get mad and don't talk to each other for years on end after disagreements - it is more likely this grandparent will not come around. Ask yourself what has happened in the past when someone acted against the core beliefs of this person. Are they still closely connected, or separated? All you can do in such a case is decide what is more important to you, adopting this child or staying on good terms with Grandma (your mother).

Once you have adopted a child, there are still times when extended family members make remarks or hold beliefs that are in conflict with the core values of adoption. When these things happen it is important that children feel entirely supported by you, their parents, while seeing you model responses and reactions that advocate for them and build family connections.

1. Challenge the remark immediately, not by yelling or starting a family feud, but by simple questions, gently asked. What do you mean by that? Why do you feel that way? This gives Grandma a chance to describe how her views were formed, what influenced her. If there are supposed "facts" in contention, you can tell Grandma that you intend to do more research on the subject and look forward to continuing the conversation later (of course you must make sure that you do indeed follow up!) Emphasis is not on challenging Grandma as a person, but talking about the differences between her attitudes and yours. This approach makes clear to children that you have serious doubts about Nana's attitudes and will put in the effort to find out the truth.

2. Prepare the child in advance for attitudes Grandma may express. Let her know what attitudes you think Grandma has and why you think she has them. Explaining why and how they were formed teaches your child an understanding of other points of view, even if you don't agree with them, and by extension teaches tolerance. State clearly that you don't agree. Give your child permission to challenge the remarks if done in an appropriate and respectful manner.
3. Sit down with your child and talk about differing attitudes about adoption or race the first moment you are alone together after inappropriate remarks are made. Clearly state your objections. Stress that you still love Grandma, but you believe her attitudes are all wrong. Encourage your child to talk to you any time she hears similar remarks elsewhere.
4. If remarks or attitudes are especially toxic, don't let Grandma say them. Interrupt with something like, "I won't let things like that be said in my home." She may be speaking out of conversational habit, because no one ever made clear that such remarks were unacceptable.
5. You can do this. It is worth creating friction with a loved one to advocate for the safety and sanctity of your family. The healthy growth of your child is at stake. Maybe they will respect your stand. Differences can exist between you and loved ones, which over time may be resolved. Not saying or doing anything is too easily interpreted by children to mean that you condone what was said or done.

Finally, don't forget that babies and young children are designed to make the rest of us fall in love with them. They are incredibly compelling and profoundly lovable. Most adults cannot stop themselves from putting aside all doubts and simply becoming their greatest champion, once they see that darling little one look at them with a gleam in their eye.... You know your family members best, but being optimistic is usually safe when it comes to welcoming children into the family.