

The Area Agency on Aging & Disabilities of Southwest Washington's Caregiver Corner

Negotiating Family Disagreements About What's Safe During the Pandemic, by Barry J. Jacobs, Psy.D

Nearly six months into the pandemic, there is still uncertainty in many parts of the country about when it will be safe for family members, if they live apart, to interact with one another normally, such as socializing in each other's homes, going out to dinner together, and hugging and kissing. Different family members of different ages and health conditions may have different degrees of vulnerability. Some may be more risk-averse than others.

While family members rarely agree on everything (and sometimes on anything), the question of how to enjoy each other's company but still protect one another from Covid-19 is now being frequently debated. Feelings can get hurt. Teenagers can feel put off by their wary, hunkered-down grandparents. Grandparents can feel neglected by adult children who stay away or alarmed by those too eager to jettison all safety precautions.

Family members can achieve greater agreement about how to proceed by using these strategies:

Work toward a common view of the local risks: Various news outlets offer contrasting and confusing reports about the status of the pandemic in any one state, city or town. It is better for a vulnerable individual to seek guidance from his or her physician or the local public health department and then share it with other family members. Not everyone will trust the expert advice at first, but this will still be a step toward building consensus.

Let logic, not emotions, rule: There is plenty of reason to be frustrated with the many ways the pandemic has negatively affected our lives. But expressions of upset never lead to fruitful conversations among any group with divergent opinions. To hash out a mutually agreeable plan for seeing family members in person, choose a time when everyone is relatively calm and better able to listen to one another without reacting.

Develop a series of incremental steps: With the professionals' advice in mind, weigh the risks and benefits together of having in-person interactions. Then consider what concrete steps your family could follow toward greater physical closeness. There may be more agreement among family members about those gradual steps than the pace at which to follow them, but you will have at least hammered out the semblance of a plan.

Defer to the cautious, not the majority or the bold: Families aren't democracies in which the arrangement that wins the most votes becomes binding. Nor should one powerful voice in the clan dictate to all. The coronavirus raises too many real concerns to over-ride any one family members' fears. If a family member isn't comfortable participating in a proposed family activity, then their preferences should be respected, not resented. It is that mutual understanding and forbearance—not a barbecue, birthday party or reunion—that will most strengthen the family over time.

Contact the Area Agency on Aging and Disabilities of Southwest Washington at 360-694-8144 or IAClark@dshs.wa.gov to learn more about supports available to family caregivers. Article content is provided by Active Daily Living.