

For Some Grandparents, Last Goal is to Be Grandkids' Favorites

by Con Chapman

NORMAL, Illinois. Mary Louise van de Kamp and Letitia Ethridge would, at first glance, seem to have little in common. The van de Kamps are soybean farmers in downstate Illinois while the Ethridges live in tony Evanston, north of Chicago, where both husband and wife were white-collar professionals before retirement.



"See? They really do like us better!"

What they have in common is little Courtney Ethridge, a two-year-old granddaughter and the first for both, but the bundle of joy who ought to be bringing the families together is tearing them apart. "It makes family get-togethers impossible," says Ellen Ethridge as she buckles Courtney into her car seat. "After this past Christmas, I'm giving up."



"We give you more money because we love you more, honey!"

It all started when the down-to-earth Mary Louise made an off-hand comment at a baby shower in praise of a pink outfit that the Ethridges purchased for the expected arrival, whose sex was known before birth because of an ultrasound. "Yore young'un will look just as cute as a pea hen in them overalls," Mary Louise said, causing Letitia to groan audibly. "I hope you're not going to talk that way in front of the child," she said. "I don't want her to grow up sounding like a hick."

Mary Louise bristled and retorted that she didn't think there was anything wrong with her manner of speaking, and the gloves were off. At Christmas, the van de Kamps made the trip to suburban Downer's Grove and presented Courtney with a t-shirt saying "My other grandma is a grim battleaxe."



"We don't wear stinky diapers like your other grandparents."

Sociologists say such open warfare between grandparents is more common now that couples are having children at a later age, leaving their parents with the feeling that the clock is running on the time they have to spend with their grandkids. "Hearing loss plays a part as well," says Dr. Michael Adams, a gerontologist. "To an 80-year-old, an innocent comment such as 'Please pass the mashed potatoes' at Thanksgiving is sometimes understood as 'Did you know we're richer than your other grandparents?'"

Politics is another source of friction between grandparents, as some baby boomers cling to the ideals of their youth while others adopted the folkways of America's business and professional classes on their way up the economic ladder. "I like this one," says Clinton DeWitt, a retired investment banker as he picks through the choices at a Talbots Kids store in Wellesley, Mass. "My other grandpa is a liberal pansy."

