

Get Your Grandchild to Spill It

by Geoff Williams

Posted: Nov 05, 2007



Admit it. You've been waiting for this your entire life. Well, OK, at least the past few months since your grandchild packed up all his worldly possessions – clothes, egg crates, coffee maker...beer funnel? — and headed to college. Yes, your grandson left a boy. And for all you know, he's coming back a man. And your granddaughter, well, for the first time in her life, she's been going it on her own. Make no mistake. This Thanksgiving, you may be in store for a touching back-porch, nudge-nudge moment with your grandchild that's worthy of a Hallmark card.

That is, if you play your cards right. Sure, you're eager to hear what he'll say, see how she's changed...and be reminded of all the zany experiences campus life provides. But what you crave is the real deal – not some watered-down version of events. That's because you, perhaps unlike some parents, can handle the truth.

Now, getting your grandchild to open up and tell it to you straight will be no easy feat. If the stars are aligned, though, you may find your grandchild not only filling in more juicy details than you imagined, but he may even ask for advice. Will your wisdom be of the caliber you used to hear Grandpa Walton dispense to John Boy every week? No sweat. With a few weeks to spare before Thanksgiving, here are a few pointers on how to broach the most scintillating of topics. In the end, getting your grandchild to spill it may be a matter of how masterfully you play that I-tell, you-tell game.

Revisiting *Animal House*: Unlike your grandmother, who assumed everyone was as wholesome as the characters on *Ozzie & Harriet*, you know college kids. As a group, they tend to drink too much and may experiment with drugs. What you want to know is if your grandchild is doing this.

How To Bring It Up: Talk openly about the concerts and parties you went to in college and see what sort of reaction that elicits. Be frank about the pressures and curiosities you faced on campus. This will either encourage your grandchild to tell stories, or it won't. If she's reticent, don't probe. The parents likely have that covered. Tip: A lot of high-school and college kids post pictures of their exploits on the social-networking Web sites Facebook.com and MySpace.com. In the name of "research", you can Google your grandchild and see what pops up before you spark this conversation.

Talking Sex: Yes, touchy and personal topic, we hear you. But, if you're curious, why not give it a try? The worst thing a grandchild can do is change the subject — or laugh out loud — to indicate this

topic is off-limits.

How To Bring It Up: You may start by asking him where he's been meeting other students, if he's been on any hot dates and what the new, no-fail pick-up lines are. Of course, you'll want to slip in some reminders about keeping it safe, as well. "Obviously, talk about being responsible," says Nancy D. O'Reilly, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist. "Bring it up casually and ask your grandchild, 'Are you being responsible?'"

Being Overwhelmed: "There's a hell of a lot more competition among kids these days," says Kenneth Dean, a grandfather of four (one who is in college) from Walla Walla, Wash. "I have a degree in business, just business. Now there are four or five different types of business degrees." Dean adds that only about 20 percent of his high school classmates went to college, a number he's sure has gone up. It has. The most recent Census shows that about 80 percent of high school students now enroll in college. So your grandchild is jockeying for the best grades and internships with thousands of peers on the same campus.

How To Bring It Up: Ask your grandchild outright: You have spare time, right? Ask him what he does when he's not in class or at the chow hall. Mention that you'd be willing to research what the job market will look like in four years, which may help him figure out the viability of various college majors. In this way, you can instill confidence in your grandchild to decide which area of study will be best suited for him or her.

Searching Identity: Draw on your memory here, and let it guide you. Many young people in their teens go through a process of self-discovery. Your grandchild may take a short and direct route, or a long, curvy road to the final destination. At this point, you may wish she would lose what she's found — especially if it's a nose stud, a tongue piercing or a tattoo. Just keep it mind that your grandchild's journey, like yours, is far from over.

How To Bring It Up: If you get the feeling your grandchild is on an identity quest, says O'Reilly, above all, be supportive and don't give her a hard time about a new look or image she's trying out. Leave the judgments and worry up to the parents. Laugh with her (cue photo album) about the days when you wore braids, cut-off jean shorts and tie-dyed shirts, humming Joan Baez and singing the praises of Hubert Humphrey.

Back then, your grandparents probably thought you were insane, a communist, or high. (Okay, maybe that last one was true.) So, you know how those kinds of snap judgments can chase away a grandchild. This doesn't mean, insists O'Reilly, you should pretend to like what you see. But try taking a light approach along the lines of, "I'm not sure I'd want purple hair for myself, but if you want it, hey, that's your choice."

Recovering from Violence: The Virginia Tech shooting that occurred earlier this year may have altered the way your grandchild views his or her college campus. "That was never in the back of my mind at high school or college, that someone could come into a classroom and kill me," says O' Reilly, "but that is a possibility in their world today."

How To Bring It Up: Keep this real. Acknowledge that what happened on the Virginia Tech campus was terrifying and shocking. Ask your grandchild what her opinion of the shooting is and listen. Every era has its frightening moments. You may remember hiding under a wooden desk in the face of a possible nuclear attack. And, how could you forget the aftershock that hit after JFK and MLK were struck down? Maybe one of your family members was killed in Vietnam. If your grandkids hear about what scared you as a young person, this may give them some perspective and support.

Whatever topics you bring up, whatever advice you impart, "Stay nonjudgmental," suggests O'Reilly. "They've got parents. Your grandchildren need love and support from someone who isn't on their case."
