

# Let them eat cake?: Study reveals grandparents spoil grandchildren with sugar-loaded foods and drinks

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Sugar, treats and everything sweet—that's what grandparents let the grandkids eat. According to new research published in the February

issue of *The Journal of the American Dental Association (JADA)*, more than two thirds (72%) of mothers indicated that grandparents give their young children sugary foods and beverages.

Mothers typically described that grandparents fed large amounts of cariogenic, or cavity-causing, foods and beverages (for example, candy, baked goods, juice, and soda) or did not limit their grandchildren's consumption of cariogenic foods and beverages.

Researchers from the University of Pittsburgh, West Virginia University and the University of Michigan conducted an in-person, two-year study of 126 participants to examine which factors influenced mothers to talk with grandparents about giving grandchildren sugary foods and beverages.

The results, published in *JADA*, show that of even though 72% of mothers said their children's grandparents give them sugary foods and beverages, only slightly more than half (51%) addressed the issue with grandparents. Factors that influenced whether mothers had this conversation included:

- The frequency at which the grandparents and children interacted
- The mothers' dependency on grandparents for childcare
- The quantity of sugary foods and beverages provided by grandparents
- The strength of the relationship between mothers and their children's grandparents

"I have many happy memories of raiding the candy jar at my own grandparents' house, and as a parent, I've hesitated with some of these talks myself," said ADA spokesperson Dr. Genaro Romo, a Chicago-based dentist.

"Yet, cavities are the most common chronic childhood disease and can cause undue pain, as well as issues with speaking, eating, playing and learning. Over time, in addition to dental [health concerns](#), a diet with excess added sugars puts kids at higher risk of cardiovascular disease, and obesity, among other health concerns."

According to the American Dental Association (ADA), the more a child's mouth is exposed to sugary treats and beverages per day, the greater the risk for [tooth decay](#). Bacteria in the mouth feed on sugar producing acid that attacks and weakens [tooth enamel](#).

## Parents nationwide sugar coat things, too

To add not-so-nice icing on the cake, in January 2023, the ADA conducted a separate survey of 1,002 U.S. parents of children 17 years old or younger via a consumer research firm. Results show more than two-thirds of parents (68 percent) believe their children get more [sugary foods](#) and beverages at their grandparents' house than at home. Of those parents:

- Seventy-three percent (73 percent) say they would address their own parents but not their partner's parents
- Less than half (43 percent) indicate they would address their partner's parents
- Only about a third of parents (34 percent) confirm they would address both their parents and their partner's parents

"There is nothing sweeter than the relationship between children and [grandparents](#)," said ADA spokesperson Dr. Mary Hayes, a pediatric dentist. "Have the 'treats in moderation' conversation, encourage water or milk versus juice or soda, and if offering a treat, opt for plain chocolate because saliva washes it out of the mouth more easily than sticky or hard candies."

**More information:** Jacqueline M. Burgette et al, Factors affecting maternal decision making about grandparents' cariogenic dietary choices for children, *The Journal of the American Dental Association* (2022).  
[DOI: 10.1016/j.adaj.2022.10.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adaj.2022.10.003)

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