



Figuring out how to adapt to the new phases in the parent-child relationship can be tricky. If you fail to navigate that transition well, the result will be stress, alienation, and maybe a broken relationship. But it doesn't have to be that way. This book provides the help you need.

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Your Relationship with Your Adult Child

How would you describe your relationship with your adult child? Your answer to this question will reveal where you need to start or pick up if you desire a growing relationship. Because human relationships are dynamic and always changing, understanding where you are will give you some clues as to where you need to go.

Perhaps you and your adult child have a close, healthy relationship. Or perhaps relations between you have been strained. Perhaps your grown child is involved in a lifestyle that troubles you, or perhaps he is stuck and not moving ahead in life. Perhaps he has financial problems. Maybe your daughter has had a string of dysfunctional relationships and suffers from crippling low self-esteem. Perhaps her job doesn't pay enough to provide her with a living wage and she has moved back home.

How can you be the parent your child needs at this stage of his or her life? What about your own needs?

This book will cover many scenarios that affect your parenting of your adult children and offer practical ways to move forward. In most cases, you can have a positive, growing relationship with your adult children—even a friendship. Let's get started with a look at how we can be influential in their lives.

OUR ABILITY TO INFLUENCE

Too many parents minimize their own power to create a positive climate; they blame any difficulties on the child's behavior. "If Bridget would only stop dating that miserable creature, we could get along well again," one father said. Such a statement assumes that the parent is powerless until the child makes a change. This attitude of blame has led many parents to believe "there's nothing else I can do." Once they believe this myth, a fractured relationship may continue indefinitely.

Parents can't create a good relationship with a child, but they can help create a climate in which the relationship can develop.

Far more productive is this approach: "I do not like the present behavior of my adult child. I know that I can't change that behavior, but I can and will seek to have a positive influence on her."

Your attitude, words, and behavior do influence your child every time you are together. When your child drops by, look him in the eye and say sincerely, "Hi, nice to see you. You're looking good. What's going on?"

You have created a climate that promotes communication. But if you merely glance up and say, "I hope you don't wear that cap at work," you have erected a major roadblock.

As parents, we must take responsibility for our own power of influence and stop blaming our children for a less than optimal relationship. We are older and should be more mature. Our children, even though grown, are on the front end of life, still trying to learn. We can go a long way in creating a good climate in which that learning can take place. Parents can't create a good relationship with a child, but they can help create a climate in which the relationship can develop.

We need to continue to evolve in our parenting roles as our children become adults. Unfortunately, many parents do not make appropriate changes so that they can reach a truly rewarding adult-to-adult relationship with their children. But when parents and adult children behave in a mature manner, all of them can experience a new meaning and joy in life.

Unfortunately, some parents look to their adult children to meet their own needs. One mother was challenged to ask herself, *Am I making my grown child an idol? Do I look to him to affirm my value as a person?* Instead, confident parents of adult children convey affection and respect to them in a healthy manner. They place genuine importance on their children's feelings and thoughts and let them know that those opinions and feelings are deeply important. They want to come to truly understand their children. They want to know how much guidance and freedom their children need. Parents who are sensitive to their children in these ways often come to the wonderful realization of how deeply they respect and value their adult children as friends.

Let's take a few moments to examine three less-than-ideal tendencies of parenting. If you believe you have been prone to any of these styles, let me encourage you that a course correction is possible.

Overprotection

Parents who insist, “Let me do it for you,” fall into a trap of overprotection. They want to do for their children what, perhaps, had not been done for them during their own growing up years. However, they do so much that their children never learn to do for themselves. Their “kindness” fosters a dependency that appears in several areas of life, whether it was too much help with school-work, money management, or skills needed for daily living.

Some young people go into adulthood unprepared to take care of themselves. If they then marry similarly handicapped persons, they will have major conflict in marriage, as they each expect the other to be responsible.

The parent who recognizes the pattern needs to take responsibility for changing it, or their adult child will be dependent for a lifetime.

Overprotective parents usually accept one or two false beliefs. The first is that a child cannot make it without the parent’s constant involvement. The second is that the parent cannot bear the thought of a child—even an adult child—having any pain or problems out in the real world. Ironically, this is most prevalent in parents who have had to survive great hardships and have emerged as compe-

tent people. Instead of realizing that their hardships are what made them strong and competent, they desire that their children have problem-free lives with no character-building trials. They forget that it takes preparation and training to be able to function and prosper in a world that is far from being user-friendly. Part of this training is to experience difficulty, for there is no other way to learn to deal with the normal stresses of life.

This parenting style is very difficult to change, but the parent

who recognizes the pattern needs to take responsibility for changing it, or their adult child will be dependent for a lifetime. The older the child, the more difficult to break the pattern. But failure to break the pattern will eventually result in greater pain for both.

Steve and Lynda's Story

Still, the pattern can be broken later, as one couple would tell you. Steve and Lynda realized their dependency patterns with Monica only when their daughter had graduated from college. Prior to that, they had paid all of Monica's college living expenses, including giving her a credit card and paying her bills. Every two or three weeks, she would come home from school for the weekend, bringing her dirty clothes to be washed and enjoying home cooking without offering to help.

The way Steve and Lynda saw it, they were just glad that Monica came home often; they felt thankful that they could take care of her expenses. They thought Monica respected them and felt as close to them as they did to her.

These feelings began to change, however, when Monica moved in with a girlfriend after graduation. Her parents thought she was on her way to establishing her own lifestyle but wondered why she continued to bring home her laundry. One day they got a call from her roommate saying that Monica had not paid her part of the rent for the past two months and had also borrowed money that she hadn't repaid. "I know you two are close to Monica," she said, "and I just thought that before this gets out of hand perhaps you could talk to her about it."

Steve and Lynda were shocked. As they talked through the situation with each other, they realized that their parenting style had not taught Monica to manage money or take responsibility. They

knew that if they did not do something to help their daughter change her habits, and quickly, she could be in serious trouble.

Meanwhile, Monica was struggling with the pressures of her new job. She knew that she was not doing well in handling her money, and she didn't respond well when her parents confronted her with what they had learned. Through angry tears she said, "I feel like you're disappointed with me and don't trust me with money. I thought you wanted to do my laundry and to have me come for meals."

"We do want you to come over for meals," her father said. "We enjoy being with you, but we also want you to learn how to cook and do your own laundry. We realize that we have failed to teach you both of these things. About the money, it's not that we don't trust you but that we now know we haven't given you any help in understanding how to manage money. We feel that this is an area of parenting where we have failed you."

After a few more rounds of words and tears trying to understand one another, they all agreed that some changes would be in order, for Monica's own good. However, she had been dependent on her parents for so long that her behavior patterns were not going to change quickly. In the early stages of their plan, Steve and Lynda rescued her a few times from financial situations, until they realized that this was not helping her. They had to allow her car to be repossessed when she failed to meet the monthly payments. This was very difficult for them, but they knew they could not rescue her again. In the beginning, Monica accused them of abandoning her.

Over the next months, Monica did learn how to handle her money, how to do her laundry, fix meals, and numerous other tasks that her parents had done for her. Eventually, she got another car, and took care of routine maintenance.

In her late twenties, Monica married a fine man she met at work. He was glad he had married someone who knew how to get things done and told his in-laws he hoped that when the time came, he would raise his children as well as they had raised Monica. They smiled at each other and thanked their new son-in-law. That night at home, they congratulated each other on the hard work they had done over the last several years in helping Monica become independent.

Undermanagement

Parents who do not give enough management to their children's lives can be of various types. Some may seem distant and unapproachable, and not know how to care for their child's emotional needs. Many undermanage because they fear displeasing their children, even losing their love; some give minimal input because they dislike conflict. Others may be overly permissive; still others have devoted little time to their children's lives because of their own busy or long work schedules, which often leave them tired when they arrive home.

Those parents who seem distant usually grew up in homes where their own parents provided for physical needs but failed to relate to them on an emotional level. Consequently, they have only vague ideas of how to develop such a relationship with their own children. These parents need to work toward understanding the

A comic strip character was bemoaning the challenges of raising parents. "Nothing I try to teach her sinks in," he said, exasperated. "You never know how tough life can be until you have parents of your own."¹

For parents who realize that they have a distant relationship with their adult children, a change in lifestyle is called for.

value of emotional closeness with their children. Ideally, this would be done when the children are young, but it is never too late to learn.

For parents who realize that they have a distant relationship with their adult children, a change in lifestyle is called for. You can no longer do what you have always done if you want to minimize the weakness of this parenting style. If your problem is that you are too busy working or helping others or just uncomfortable being open and transparent, you need to pay attention and begin connecting with your children, even those who are grown and out of your home.

Mark was one such parent. Mark is the father of two sons. When they were both in their twenties and still single, he started to notice that, while cordial at family get-togethers, his sons didn't seem to have much to say to him but were more conversant with their mother. It dawned on Mark that he had done little to develop a relationship with the boys as they were growing up, and he wondered if it was too late to change that.

Mark first talked with his wife about this and then with his sons, sharing with them his sense of having let them down. He told them: "To the best of my ability, I want to change this starting now. I know I spent many hours at work during your childhood, maybe more than I should have, but I did that with you in mind. However, that's no excuse for not spending more time with you."

Josh and his older brother Brad were somewhat uncomfortable with Mark's confession, but they both agreed to try to be intentional in spending more time together. They began meeting for breakfast

every other Saturday and attended sporting events together. As the weeks and months went on, both young men began to be more open with Mark about their interests and even uncertainties. Mark had rarely talked with his own father about personal matters, so his parenting style naturally flowed to a hands-off approach.

But as time went on since Mark confessed to his sons that he had been uninvolved, both sons have developed a much closer relationship with their dad. Brad sought his advice before buying a car and Josh asked—and listened to—his opinion on whether to return to college or try a trade school. He mentioned certifying in heating and cooling, with the draw of being able to start a good job without student loan debt. When Brad took a job in a distant suburb, the in-person meetings were not as frequent, but Mark purposed to text or phone him at least once a week. Mark just wishes that his eyes had been opened earlier to the value of giving more time and attention to his children.

Why have some parents gotten into the habit of undermanaging their children? Some parents who undermanage their children simply hate conflict. When the children realize this at whatever age, they are eager to take advantage of it. Even if we have an aversion to conflict, we must remind ourselves that our children need to learn good values and skills, many of which they may not encounter unless we provide the kind of direction we should.

Those parents who are very permissive choose to be uninvolved, even subconsciously. Their thinking is that their children can do as they please—even in situations where direction, protection, or control is needed. These parents need to be more aware of what is

appropriate freedom or responsibility for various age levels. Also, they need to be more cautious in a dangerous world.

Most parents who undermanage their children do so because they have been confused about parenting and were afraid of displeasing their children, even losing their love. They either struggled with their own self-esteem, or they misunderstand the true meaning of discipline during the childrearing years.²

Micromanagement

With this parenting style, the parents are deeply involved with their children, devoting much energy to help their offspring learn and grow. Since the children's earliest years, the parents sought to give their children auditory and visual stimuli to develop their intellectual capacities. They gave lots of hugs and kisses and affirming words to meet the children's emotional needs. They attended every ball game, musical recital, and spelling bee.

The description sounds positive, doesn't it? Now, as their children move into adulthood, they intend to continue being good parents. The problem is that they fail to shift gears, and the young adults who are seeking independence feel dominated. Thus, they draw away from their parents, spending less time with them and asking for advice less frequently. This hurts the parents, who feel that their children are abandoning them.

The solution? Parents whose style is intense, hands-on management need to draw back, pray more and probe less, and give their children the freedom to make decisions on their own.

Micromanaging a child can also mean handling the child with an authoritarian attitude, being a boss to the child; even, in a sense, playing God. It can mean giving orders as though the child were a Marine recruit. This is fine in the military, but no way to "start

children off on the way they should go.”³ This approach may seem to work when the child is small, but it is actually counterproductive. It does not teach a child to interact with you or others in healthy and meaningful ways. Therefore, you are depriving your child of the privilege of learning the skills of social interaction. She cannot learn to carry on pleasant small talk, an increasingly critical skill as more and more communication between people is done in brief spurts by texting, complete with emojis and GIFs, or on other social media. She will be hampered in learning to make decisions and think for herself. A child who is continually told what to do and how to think will struggle with learning how to manage life.

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Micromanagement leaves the child no other emotional recourse than to become angry. Since there is little room for discussion or the teaching of verbal skills to handle the anger, the child's anger will emerge in unhealthy ways. An adult child who was—or is still being—micromanaged probably displays anti-authority behavior toward employers and others. Many religious parents use the micromanagement approach to parenting, partly because they have been taught that this is what God desires. However, such an approach will backfire on them when the children reach adulthood. Maybe you've already noticed this with your adult children.

Besides developing anger, the child reared by the overmanaging parental style will likely fail to learn to accept responsibility for his own behavior. All around us we see people who have never learned this, so they see themselves as perpetual victims. Everything is someone else's fault.

The negatives of this parenting style need not continue. Vince and Teresa had both had meddlesome parents who micromanaged. When the couple married, they struggled to free themselves from the interference of two sets of parents. Teresa's mother called her every day, asking what she was doing at the moment, reminding her to wear a warm hat on cold days, offering to drop by with a nutritious meal—and often did without asking first. Her father was always at Vince with “better” ideas about car maintenance and home repairs, often undoing something Vince had already completed.

When the couple was on vacation and Teresa's parents had a key so they could bring in the mail and “check that everything's okay,” they painted the kitchen “a more durable color.” Vince and Teresa decided they'd had enough. Though it was awkward, they sat the parents down and explained how much they valued their relationship and interest in their lives. Then they plunged in with the changes they expected to begin immediately. They repeated the discussion with Vince's parents.

Parents who seek to teach their children to make decisions by allowing them the freedom to do so will likely minimize the tendency to meddle in the lives of their young adults. They will be there for their children, but they will not dominate. One wise boundary many parents have set for themselves is not to give their married children advice unless requested. Sharing this self-imposed boundary with children before they marry is a good way to let them hold you accountable for staying within the boundary you yourself have set.

YOU CAN DO IT

It is crucial to understand that no one has done a perfect job with their children. Parenting is about the most difficult job in the world,

and few of us have had any training in it. Yet, even if you had the best training in the world, there are still situations that no one can foresee, and some that almost no one can cope with well. Every family is different and every child unique. When we admit that we have made mistakes, and when we understand just how and when we misjudged, we can begin to do something about it.

Most parents have done something right. It is helpful to make a list of all the ways you have been a good parent. You should enumerate them, from the small acts to the most sacrificial, to help you see the whole picture. You want to focus on the complete relationship with your child, not only on what has gone wrong. Emphasize the positive aspects of your bond with your child and what you have done well.

"At life's banquet of
success I may not be
the guest of honor,
but I'll be among
those present."

— Emily in
Emily Climbs
by Lucy Maud
Montgomery

A PARENT'S POSITIVE LOVE

Adult children are most open to the influence of those who love them. This is often why they are so receptive to the influence of peers and closed to their parents. Their friends give them acceptance and affirmation, and their parents may give them condemnation. Parents who wish to be a positive influence must focus on meeting their children's need for emotional love. But how can we parents make our children feel they are loved?

We do this by assuring our adult children in many ways that "I

love you, no matter what.” At times, we may not like their behavior, but that doesn’t mean we withhold our love. To do so is to love them “only if . . .” which is not true love. It is okay to tell your child, “I may not like what you are doing, but it will not keep me from loving you.” This is true unconditional parental love.

SPEAK THE LOVE LANGUAGES⁴

As you seek to meet your son’s or daughter’s need for emotional love, it is important to realize that not everyone understands the same love language. What makes one person feel loved will not necessarily make another feel that way. Thus, your child may not sense your love if you are speaking or expressing your love in a way (language) she doesn’t understand. In my years as a pastor and counselor, I found patterns indicating that there are five basic languages of love and that each person will understand one of them more deeply than the other four. It is the parents’ job to know the primary love language of their adult child and to give heavy doses of love in this language.

Here is a brief description of the five languages. Each of these languages represents a different way you can express love. Again, your adult child will most sense your love when you speak her language (although our children need to receive expressions of love in all five languages).

1. Words of Affirmation. You use words to build up or affirm the person. “You look nice today . . . Thanks for feeding the dog . . . I appreciate your bringing in the mail while I was gone . . . Your car looks great . . . I like your apartment.” To the person whose love language is *words of affirmation*, all these statements express love. “Your boss must have really been pleased. This report is impressive . . . I’m

proud that you are my son/daughter . . . You are a wonderful parent to your babies.” Such statements are appropriate words of affirmation for young adults.

2. Gifts. The bestowing of gifts is a universal language of love. A gift says, “He was thinking of me. Look at what he brought me.” Phil knew that his twentysomething son Darren had collected Coke bottles when he was in junior high and still had the bottles stored in his apartment. During a business trip to Egypt, Phil bought Darren a Coke bottle with Arabic writing. When he gave it to him on his return, Phil saw the biggest smile he had seen in years. The reason was that, to Darren, the gift said to him: “Dad remembered. He cares.” Gifts need not be expensive; they may be as simple as a stone picked up on a hiking trail—or a Coke bottle. They are visual symbols that someone cares.

3. Acts of Service. This involves doing things that you know will be appreciated. Cooking a favorite meal or dessert, repairing a mechanical device, keeping your son’s pet or children while he and your daughter-in-law are on vacation, mowing their grass when he isn’t feeling well—all of these are more than acts of kindness. They are speaking love on an emotional level, for they demonstrate that you care. And if this is your adult child’s primary love language, such acts make your son or daughter feel loved.

4. Quality Time. In spending quality time with your child, you are giving her your undivided attention, really giving a part of your life, so that she has all of you at that moment. Quality time may include taking a walk together or crafting or going to a movie together. The important thing is not the activity but being together. Conversations are part of most expressions of quality time. Conversations are enhanced by eye contact. Wise parents give focused attention

when their young adult starts talking. Being an intentional listener speaks volumes.

5. Physical Touch. The language of physical touch may include a hug when the child comes for a visit, a pat on the back as he enters the room, sitting close enough to touch shoulders as you watch TV or a movie together, a hand on the shoulder as you serve him a soda. All of these express love through touch.

Requests and Suggestions

Our love tank is the part of us that represents our need for emotional love. If you are expressing love to your child and thereby keeping his or her love tank full, you probably know that *requests are more productive than demands*. No one likes to be controlled, and demands are efforts at controlling. Demands may get results, but they are almost always accompanied by resentment.

I'm not suggesting that you should never resort to demanding anything of your young adult children, especially those who still live in your home. Just keep them as a last effort, not the first. Requests should always be as specific as possible, since general requests are ambiguous and seldom get the desired results.

I also recommend that you *give suggestions rather than proclamations*, especially when your child is grown and out of the house. "You need to get this application in today or you are not going to get the job" is a proclamation. It assumes that you know everything. "You know what I would suggest? That you try to finish up that application and submit it. Probably the sooner you do that, the more likely you are to get an interview and perhaps the job" is a suggestion. Young adults tend to respond much more positively to suggestions than they do proclamations.

When we come across as issuing decrees, our adult children are likely to dismiss them and not give them serious thought. However, when we offer suggestions, we are acknowledging our humanity and limited experience. We are simply sharing our best thoughts, which they are more likely to receive as such, and give them due consideration.

HOPE FROM THE BIBLE

Some of us have forgotten how to be confident in a fallen world. Parenting has changed just as our world has changed. Our children have grown, and we keep having to learn the next lessons.

By this time, we are well aware of the mistakes we have made and that we are far from perfect parents. And yet, we ourselves can go on to greater maturity and be ready to make the necessary changes for the future. And we can help our children move to maturity as well.

You can find inspiration, comfort, and confidence in parenting in the Bible. I encourage you to read the many words of wisdom and encouragement it gives concerning our children, even those who are grown. Two that come to mind are “Children are a heritage from the LORD, offspring a reward from him” and “From everlasting to everlasting the LORD’s love is with those who fear [respect] him, and his righteousness with their children’s children.”⁵

Other verses of hope include Psalm 112:2; Isaiah 44:3–5; 54:13; and Jeremiah 31:17. Such verses can sustain parents who are concerned and prayerful about their children.

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