



Adult Children

By Dr. Linda Hancock

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Hancock has written a regular weekly column entitled “All Psyched Up” for newspapers in two Canadian provinces for more than a dozen years. Over the years, her readers and clients have said that they have benefited from her common-sense solutions, wisdom, and sense of humour. Dr. Linda Hancock, the author of “Life is An Adventure...every step of the way” and “Open for Business Success” is a Registered Psychologist who has a private practice in Medicine Hat. She can be reached at 403-529-6877 or through email office@drlindahancock.com

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Lately I have been working with a number of individuals who referred themselves because they don't know how to deal with their adult children.

Some are concerned about relationship problems and others with financial dealings. Still others are worried about choices that the adult child has or is making. Several couples have boundary and respect difficulties. Dealing with family members can be difficult at times. Some parents want to be "just like my parents" and others want to be "nothing like my parents". Some view children as a gift, others as a burden. There are parents who want to be friends with their children and parents who don't want to have any contact with them. Some parents treat their toddler children like "little adults" or "dolls". Others treat their adult children like babies.

The transition from childhood to adulthood is kind of like having one foot on the pier and one foot in the canoe. If you don't or can't decide where you want to be, you're going to get wet! Many teens want to be treated like adults and, at the same time, have all the privileges of their youth. They would like to make their own decisions but still want to have their needs and wants paid for by the parents. If this pattern continues the relationship becomes more complicated than it needs to be. I know of parents who give money on a regular basis to their adult children who have large incomes. Some adult children "visit" their parents but treat them in a very disrespectful manner. Others live with the expectation that the parents' Last Will and Testament will be like a winning "lottery ticket" which will cover the debts that they have built up in the meantime. Many children have a concept of "Ours" thinking that what is the parents' is "Ours". I remember one of my children's teenage friends talking with his father about money. He said "But dad, we're rich". His father calmly replied "No. I'm rich. You are poor"!

Some parents are afraid of upsetting their children, losing their "friendship" or not meeting the expectations that they have for their role as a parent. They are tied up in "shoulds", "have tos" and "musts". It is easy for their adult children to intimidate them to get their needs met. When the parents give to the child the parent isn't always doing so in a healthy manner. The result of the giving may include resentment, worry or fear. When families are in business together, the problems can intensify. Where are the boundaries? When we go out for lunch together, who pays? If there is a divorce in the family, how will everyone treat each other? Can the business continue? My son is a computer expert. I often ask him to do work for me. Sometimes he doesn't bill me and sometimes he says I can pay "Mom rate". I don't charge him for the costs associated with sleeping in the guest room at my condo, eating my food or riding in my car when he visits me and some people might therefore expect him to do computer work for free because he's my son. My solution has been to pay him for the same amount of time that I would have paid another business person for the activities that I would have otherwise contracted out. I don't pay him for things that he thinks I might like unless I would have hired someone else to do the same thing. I treat his skills in a business fashion but his visits like I would any other guest.

One of the most important things to do with adult children is to talk with them about the relationship. Do not be afraid to ask them what their plans for independence are once they have a career and are still living at home. You do not have to continue paying the bills for them but you may need to help them realize that things changed when they started earning an income. Another topic for discussion is boundaries. Do you still want them to have a key to your house? How will you decide who pays for Sunday lunch after church? Will you allow them to make their own decisions - even when they seem to be headed for trouble? If your children are adults, they are used to talking with other people about their relationships, needs and wants. Treat them like adults but in return, expect respect from them. Children can be rude and demanding and dependent at times. Adults need to be responsible, respectful and independent. How do you handle adult children? Any way you want, as long as it is healthy for you and for them. If you need help with this contact a Registered Psychologist who has training and experience in problem-solving.