



Relationships - What Do Your Adult Children Need?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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I was recently visiting with another professional in the community who teased me about wanting pro bono services for his staff. I quickly informed him that everyone wants free therapy - except my adult children!

My daughter keeps jokingly threatening to write a book entitled "My life as the child of a psychologist". It seems that she believes her situation is a unique one but, after seeing over 7000 clients, I am convinced that many adult children think their relationships with their parents are unique.

Some parents think that they need to take responsibility for their adult children and, as a result, focus time and energy on trying to get them to make "good" decisions. They lose sleep and worry when their child chooses a partner or career that might, at first glance, seem to be "unsuitable". They defend or "bail" their son or daughter when trouble surfaces and frequently sacrifice their own needs in order to meet the demands of the son or daughter. Many times, these parents end up raising the next generation when the task seems to default to them. They feel like the future of the whole family depends on them and they therefore invest everything they have into doing things that likely should be done by others.

Other parents think they need to be friends with their adult children and do what the child asks for fear of losing the relationship. Weak boundaries between them often result in relationship problems. In fact, it can be difficult at times to discern which person is the child and which is the parent. Frequently personal information that is inappropriately disclosed between them becomes the fodder for role confusion. The child becomes confidant, therapist or advisor to the parent. Over time, this can be a real burden for them and leave the parent in a vulnerable situation.

A third type of parent consists of those who are estranged or in some way disconnected from their children - sometimes this occurs even before they reach the age of majority. Parenting is difficult for them and they find it easier to just walk away from the task rather than develop skills and provide the structure that the child needs. They become "tired" of the fight - not just the fight between themselves and the child but the fight to maintain an appropriate parenting role. At times they may do the right thing but at other times they just "give up" and let the child rule. This situation can lead to a family where good consistent role models are absent and children find themselves constantly looking for the approval and love that they are missing from other sources. And the pattern perpetuates itself down through the generations!

Often parents ask me how they should deal with their adult children. They want to have good relationships with them but are not sure where the boundaries should be or how to put them in place. They don't want to live their children's lives for them but, at the same time, don't want to let go of their own values and beliefs.

Relationships are hard work and family relationships not only change over time but usually last a lifetime so there isn't any possible way that we could deal with all the issues in one short article.

I have come to realize over time, however, that there are three statements that people need and want to hear from their parents. I believe that we can all improve or heal our relationships with our adult children by openly and genuinely speaking them:

1. **"I love you"** - There is much confusion and different opinions about what it means to love your child. Love does not mean that you will "give in" and provide them with whatever they want even if it isn't good for them. Love is not based entirely on actions although it can be demonstrated in this form. It is not just a feeling although emotions enter into the equation. Love is a decision and a commitment to the child. It is a statement made by the parent that pledges healthy support - despite any behaviours that the parent might not endorse.

2. **"I'm proud of you"** - No matter what a person does in life, there is always something the adult child has done that a parent can admire and compliment. Perhaps it is a career move, a positive personal choice, a skill, character trait or even a kind word offered to someone who needed it. Always focus on the things that your child has done well and tell them that you noticed. No one likes to constantly hear what we have done poorly but we all treasure the times when someone tells us that we have done well.

3. **"I believe in you"** - These words are very powerful! They are generally not heard very often and perhaps that is why they are so appreciated. Believing in your adult child might be exactly what they need to move forward with a goal or perhaps offers them the hope they need just when they are feeling discouraged.

Being a parent is a demanding job. As your child ages and enters adulthood, the relationship changes though. They are not strangers or individuals who should be isolated. You no longer need to assume the same degree of responsibility for them but just because they are older does not mean they are your friends, advisors or therapist.

I realize that there are situations where dysfunction or circumstances have seriously affected family relationships. Because of this, at times, it is better to allow distance to protect those involved.

If you are struggling with trying to develop or maintain healthy relationships with your adult children, schedule an appointment with a psychologist who will help you to make good decisions about this.

As difficult as it can be, try to save your pro bono advice for others (unless your adult child asks for it). Instead offer them the three simple statements that feed their souls "I love you". "I am proud of you". "I believe in you."

You see, there is a healthy role for parents who have adult children.

(I think I'll send this article to my three adult children today!)

Happy parenting!