

How to parent your adult child – The Guardian

I am watching television when my daughter comes over for a cuddle. Nothing unusual in that, perhaps, except that she is 23, has a full-time job, and is used to travelling round the world on her own. Most of the time, her response to even an affectionate hair ruffle is to dart away.

So while this momentary closeness is a poignant reminder of her earlier years, I feel a touch of anxiety as well. Is anything going on in her life that she needs help with? Any worries? And what can – or can't – I ask?

The truthful answer is, probably not that much. Negotiating your offsprings' early 20s can be one of the trickiest periods in a parent's life, and is certainly the least charted. While the market is saturated with books on babyhood, early childhood and the teens, there are remarkably few about the young adult phase, particularly its deeper emotional aspects. All of which is a pity, as I have lost count of the conversations I have had with puzzled, confused or disappointed parents of sons and daughters aged around 18 to 25, unsure of how to handle their own or their children's emotions.

As the mother of a 21-year-old told me plaintively: "My daughter and I used to talk about everything, we were so close. Now we can just about get through a discussion on what to eat for supper." A father of two young adults puts it well: "I am so careful to respect their space, not to intrude, that I fear I end up looking as if I simply don't care."

Like most of my friends, I left home straight after university. "It would have been plain weird to live with my parents after the age of 18 or 19," says one friend. Nowadays, of course, a large number of young adults still live at home, most working hard to establish solid incomes and relationships and master the practical skills of living, but inevitably radiating an air of despondency because of the difficulty of acquiring sufficient resources to set up independently.

But the despondency can work both ways. Says the mother of one 24-year-old: "My daughter has recently moved back in with me after three years living and working in another city. I thought we had done the separation thing successfully. I have settled down to life on my own and am relishing it. Don't get me wrong, we are really close. But having her back in my home? Well, I'm beside myself, which, of course, makes me feel guilty."

Living with adult children makes it even harder to stand back and let them fix their own emotional problems. A friend whose son experiences occasional bouts of depression says: "When he was younger, I would have made doctors' appointments or suggested the right book to read and he would have accepted it. Recently, I made some useful suggestions and he said: 'I'm sorry this just isn't helping me.' He shut the conversation down.

"It was a more adult dismissal, not a teenage fit of pique. And he was right, of course. It alerts me to the fact that I can't fix stuff and he doesn't want me to. But it feels very hard, partly because we are living under the same roof and I can see the mistakes he is making on a daily basis."

I have learned to draw on what I call the “being alongside” strategy first developed during the more explosive, but hands-on, teenage years. Lifts and walks, visits to the shops, cooking a meal together: freed of the weight of expectation, the talk will often flow more freely. Indeed, it may positively tumble out, wholly unedited.

Slowly, I have learned to listen more, and talk less, so that nowadays I largely stay silent, bar encouraging murmurs, or prompt questions, offering little commentary or advice (which is surprisingly hard) unless asked (which, these days, I almost never am).

More broadly, I am convinced that taking a genuine interest in our young adults’ lives as they are, not as we wish they should or could be, is an essential part of navigating this tricky phase. Rather like the skills of a loving friendship, which a surprisingly high number of adults never master either, it is not easy to get right, but all too clear when it goes wrong.

We have all met the parent who vocally disapproves of a child’s partner because they are of the wrong sex, class or ethnic background, or the mother or father who has a fixed idea of what success looks like and is disdainful or judgmental of different paths or periods of experimental uncertainty. Almost all parents have struggled with similar feelings, but the important thing is to learn to keep them contained.

On the other hand, a little effort goes a long way. As our children get older, move away, leave home for college or university, we often don’t know their friends or understand their social world, or not in the way we did when they were little and under our care or control.

I believe it helps enormously not only to make these new friends and interests welcome, but to display curiosity, empathy and kindness in relation to our children’s developing – and inevitably separate – life choices. I learned this years ago, when a man I knew in my 20s told me that when his best friend at university killed himself, he wanted his parents to go to the funeral, even though they had only met the friend a couple of times. They refused on the grounds that this loss was really nothing to do with them. He never forgave them for what he saw not just as their callousness to the dead friend’s family, but their refusal to accept what mattered so much to him. That breach endured and coloured his relationship with them for decades.

Bottom Line

Our children will always be our children, but once they turn 18 or leave home, they also are adults with lives increasingly separate from our own. It’s a challenge for parents to step back while also staying connected to their grown-up kids.

Much of the angst between parents and adult children stems from the tug-of-war over whose life it is. There often is a disconnect between parents who still want to shape their grown-up kids’ future course and the kids who are determined to live their lives their own way.

For loving parents, their grown children’s trials and errors, including failed projects and teary breakups, can be anguishing. It can be wrenching to let go of the old parental omnipotence and not be able to fix everything. But when grown kids cope with these ups and downs, they develop into resilient, self-sufficient people with the confidence that comes from standing on their own feet.

Seven “don’ts” to keep in mind when dealing with grown children...

MONEY AND CAREER

It takes a long time these days for grown kids to achieve financial independence, and my research shows that money issues are the number-one topic of conflict between parents and kids 18 to 29 years old.

- **Don't use your financial support to control your adult kids.** If you're supplying money to your adult child, you certainly can set ground rules about how that money is used—but you should not threaten to withdraw your support if the adult child doesn't make life changes unrelated to finances.

Example: It's reasonable to tell your adult child that money you're providing cannot be spent on a vacation—but don't tell him that it can't be spent on a vacation unless he leaves the girlfriend you don't like.

- **Don't push your kids to take a job in a field that pays well but that they don't like.** Not only might they hold their unhappiness with the hated job against you, their lack of passion for the field could inhibit their career growth.

Also: Don't make snide comments about the job prospects of your college-age child's field of study or the earnings potential of his line of work. It is reasonable to discuss career and earnings outlooks with your kids before they choose a college major, field of graduate study or first job. But trying to control the big decision of what field your adult child will choose is sure to stir up resentment. Keep in mind that although college majors do vary in their future earnings, getting a college degree, in any area, is the most important goal for enhancing lifelong career prospects.

- **Don't insist that your kids find their own way after college rather than return home.**

These days, many adult children live at home for a short time. Almost always, their return home is temporary because they prefer to live independently as soon as they can afford to do so.

Helpful: Agree on a division of household responsibilities. The adult child is now an adult member of the household and should do an adult share of the housework, laundry and cooking.

COMMUNICATION

Most adult children like talking to their parents and enjoy having a more adultlike relationship than they did in their teens. But...

- **Don't ask probing questions about your children's lives.** If they want to share something personal, they will. Adult children vary a lot in how much they want their parents to know about their lives and how much they want to confide in them.

Take special care not to raise subjects that your adult child has historically been disinclined to discuss. Resist the urge to ask follow-up questions on the rare occasions when your child does raise one of these subjects.

Example: Many adult children prefer not to discuss their love lives with their parents.

- **Don't overdo it.** Today's technology makes it cheap and easy to stay in contact with loved ones, and many adult children and their parents are in contact with one another nearly every day. However, for some grown kids, that's a bit too much togetherness at a time when they are striving to become self-sufficient. In general, it's best to follow your adult children's lead on communications. If they contact you weekly via text message, then contact them weekly via text message, too. Text messaging might not be your preferred communication method,

but it's a great way to touch base with today's young adults without seeming pushy. You can always slip in a phone call now and then.

Helpful: Don't feel offended if kids go a few days without answering your text message or voice mail. It doesn't mean that they don't care. It could just mean that they are busy—or that they're not that eager to discuss that particular topic.

ROMANCE

An adult child's romantic relationships can be a minefield for parents...

- **Don't confide that you "never liked" an ex-boyfriend or ex-girlfriend** or provide reasons why your adult child is better off without this former mate. Keep in mind that ex-boyfriends and ex-girlfriends sometimes reenter the picture. That could create awkwardness if you've previously expressed a dislike.
- **Don't overlook your adult child's romantic partners at family get-togethers.** If your adult child has been seeing someone for a while, be sure to include the partner in family gatherings, then do your best to make him/her feel welcome and comfortable. The more comfortable your grown child's partner is with you, the more you are likely to see of your child.

How to Give Advice to an Adult Child

Many young adults spend their 20s acting in ways that seem irresponsible to their parents. They might change jobs or romantic partners frequently or rely on their parents for financial support or housing.

This is all perfectly normal and does not mean that the young adult is destined to act this way forever.

And while adult children might seem to be in desperate need of advice, there's a good chance that they will react poorly if their parents offer it. Such guidance makes them feel as if their parents still see them as children. This puts parents in a difficult position—they want to help their grown-up kids avoid missteps, but any wisdom they offer is likely to be poorly received. Usually parents' best option is to bite their tongues and not offer their adult children advice when it hasn't been requested. Such advice might harm the relationship, and there is a good chance it won't be heeded anyway. But speaking up could be wise if...

You believe your adult child's safety is at risk. It's worth putting the relationship at risk when safety is at stake.

Examples: Don't offer unsolicited advice if you think your adult child is staying out too late—but do if you suspect he's driving home drunk. Don't tell your daughter you don't like her new boyfriend—but do speak your mind if your daughter has a black eye and you suspect that the boyfriend is responsible.

The topic is money-related and you're providing financial support. If your money is on the line, it's perfectly reasonable to voice concerns about the adult child's questionable financial decisions or even set ground rules for spending. But it will help the relationship if after voicing these concerns or setting these rules, you add something such as, "The final decision is yours, and I will continue to support you emotionally whatever you decide. I just can't continue to support you financially if you make this decision."

Example: You're paying your child's rent while he searches for a job, but you notice that he hasn't been looking for work lately.

You obtain permission to provide advice. The odds of a negative reaction decline greatly if you ask the child if he would like your input before you offer it.

Warning: Respect the child's answer. If he says he prefers to work through the problem on his own, keep your advice to yourself.

When you feel you must provide advice, also ask the adult child for his advice on a different topic about which he is knowledgeable. This can keep the relationship balanced.

The 6 Things You Shouldn't Say to Your Adult Child

September 20, 2012

As my 29-year-old son was ticking off all the weddings he and his girlfriend would be attending in the coming 12 months, I blurted, "So when are you getting married?"

"Mom!!!" he said (I swear I could hear the exclamation marks of annoyance) before his sister chimed in, "Yeah, I'd like to know, too."

I was grateful that took the attention away from me, but I was in the wrong – overstepping parental bounds and sticking my nose where it did not belong. I know perfectly well that young adults hate it when their parents pressure them about marriage, so my only self-defense is that my mouth was working more quickly than my mind. I really do expect that when my son and his girlfriend have news that involves a wedding, my husband and I will be among the first 100 people to know.

Dances With Words

Over the past several years, I've been discreetly observing young adults (not my own) on the phone with their parents. I wanted to learn the slam-down-the-phone triggers so I could avoid them. Parents often say ridiculous and sometimes hurtful things. We forget that we're speaking to mature people (not that they always make it easy to remember). We condescend when maybe we should remember that what seems innocent or even playful to us is nails on a blackboard to them.

There are just certain things that parents should never say to their grown children. Ruth Nemzoff, resident scholar at Brandeis University and author of [*Don't Bite Your Tongue: How to Foster Rewarding Relationships With Your Adult Children*](#), makes the point that parents transgress the bounds of how we should be talking even before our children grow up. "We fantasize that we can say anything we want to our kids, but the truth is, we never could," she argues. And, as both we and our kids age, our blurt-it-out tendencies seem to grow worse.

This list is meant to help you avoid uttering those unintentionally hurtful things I've

heard parents say over the years, and to offer some less offensive alternatives. (And just for the record, I've said most of them myself.)

6 Things You Should Never Say to Your Grown Child

1. Have you gained [lost] weight? Like most of us, I've read all the [articles that warn us not to nag our preteen and teenage kids – especially our daughters – about weight or eating habits](#). And yet I saw this on my cousin's son's Facebook page when he returned from his junior year abroad: "Home five minutes and Mom asks, Have you gained weight?" His friends quickly replied with comments along the lines of "Yeah, mine, too" and "I don't tell her *she's* fat."

Say instead: "I'm so glad you're back! I really missed you."

2. What's that on your face? Really and truly I have heard parents call out their adult kids' zits. And I understand – sort of. From our perspective, our kids are perfect, or nearly perfect, so any blemish is a shock. But from the kids' point of view, it's "There you go, ragging on my appearance again."

Say instead: Nothing. However, if your adult child shows up with an actual bruise or cut on his or her body, I feel it's legitimate to ask about it. (If he or she doesn't want to talk about it, let it drop – unless you have a suspicion that something bad has happened. But that's a whole other blog post.)

3. How come you hardly ever call (or text) these days? I've found that parents and their adult children define "hardly ever call" quite differently. I know that when my son's number hasn't shown up on my caller ID for three or four days, I begin to worry – unnecessarily, of course. These phone silences have more to do with what's going on in his life than how he feels about me. Sometimes he's just been really busy. It's easy to forget that he's a separate person with his own life. So every morning I repeat this mantra: "Today my kids may feel no need to talk to me." When they do call, engage, don't nag.

Say instead: Don't – just text a quick hello.

4. It's all for the best; [So-and-so] was a jerk anyway. Never speak too negatively about your adult child's partner when they split up, especially if the couple has a habit of breaking up and getting back together. This is a hard one because if someone treats your child wrong – even your self-sufficient adult child – your mama/papa bear protection instinct goes on high alert. But what happens if you badmouth the badly behaving ex? You think your kid won't remember exactly what you've said and repeat it to the reinstated sweetheart? Maybe wait it out a month or too before lambasting the b_____.

Say instead: "How are you feeling? Do you want to talk about it? I'm here for you."

5. How can you live like this? You go to visit and see they've got a week's worth of dirty dishes on the counter — while complaining about mice and cockroaches. Whether they had to do chores when they were growing up or never lifted a finger to clean up after themselves, your adult kids may have ideas about hygiene that don't match yours. There's always hope that when they settle into a job and a relationship and have kids, they'll start washing their sheets more often.

Say instead: "Let's go out to eat!"

6. What do you expect me to do? I mean, really. *Really*. This is your kid, and he or she expects you to fix it, whatever it is: a job rejection, a romantic rejection, a fight with a friend, a bee sting. Grownup problems are still boo-boos, and boo-boos are still within your bailiwick. Yeah, it can be exasperating, especially if they reject your advice out of hand. But remember those papers you John Hancock'ed when you left the hospital with your bundle of joy? They meant being a parent is a lifetime commitment, including having continual conversations. So here it is, another opportunity to have a meaningful discussion that will nudge our fledglings onto the road to responsible adulthood.

Say instead: What can I do to help?

And One Day the Tables Will Turn