

When Children Become Adults

A parent's journey never ends; it just changes.

BY SUSAN VOGT

IT'S CHRISTMAS, a family reunion, a funeral—or any other time the different generations of your family will meet up again. Whether happy or sad, the mixing of parents with adult children can be, well, complicated. When parents and adult children interact, the roles and rules have changed since parenting a toddler or teen. Both generations need to make adjustments. Neither side should need to sacrifice integrity or faith, but both need to reach for a deeper understanding of the love and history that bonds them together. This article is addressed to the elder generation.

Why bother? you might ask. Many parents feel confused and distressed as their children forge lives independent of them. Many generation Xers to millennials feel uncertain or frustrated about their emerging relationships with their parents once they leave home, start supporting themselves, get married, or have a child—not necessarily in that order. What role does faith play? Will they happily continue to embrace the faith of their upbringing or not? If not, how does this impact the relationship between the generations?

An Ongoing Journey

My own story started over 20 years ago, when I wrote the book *Raising Kids Who Will Make a Difference*. Our own children ranged in age from 6 to 21. I still believe that the values and advice in that book are solid. When I wrote it, though, I had not tested them personally, over the long haul. Would the family meetings, religious practices both at church and home, and immersion in the works of mercy really make any difference once they were on their own? My husband and I thought so. We hoped so, but we didn't know so.

I decided to follow up. About five years ago, in discussions with family-ministry colleagues, I started to hear a familiar refrain. It went like this: "I'm proud of my young adults. They are loving, generous people who care about making this world a better place, *but* they no longer go to church." My own family was also mixed in terms of practice of their faith.

This led to my surveying over 600 parents and young adults, plus self-reflection on my own 40-plus years of parenting. The follow-up book is *Parenting Your Adult Child: Keeping the Faith*

(And Your Sanity). Following are some things I learned when using eyes of faith and love rather than just worrying or wondering if I was a good enough parent.

From a parent's point of view, watching your adult child struggle with the faith of his or her upbringing—or ignore it—may bring on despair, or you may feel like a personal failure. It might seem as if the secular culture has captured our youth and they've lost their grounding. Did I do enough to nurture their faith? Should I have sent them to Catholic schools? Should I have prayed with them more at home and sent them on youth retreats?

Wait! Maybe you did all those things and still have an offspring who is searching or doesn't care.

The biggest insight I can offer is to consider that this is the way God is now acting in your life. Your adult child's search may be a call to you to deepen your own relationship with God. It may mean deepening your prayer life—not just going to Mass more often or saying more memorized prayers, but really seeking to listen to God speaking to you through the circumstances and people placed before you. It may mean doing some serious theological reflection, taking a class, expanding your reading on faith.

Reverse the attitude of woe to an attitude of opportunity. Become a person of deeper, not superficial, faith. It may not visibly change your child today, but it will be good for you. For many parents, learning about the stages of spiritual development can lessen guilt and increase your own growth.

Helpful Virtues

There are some virtues for elders that seem especially relevant when mixing generational viewpoints. For example, mindfulness of words can alert us to when to talk and when to shut up. This includes things like “talking shorter.” Ask yourself, “Have I said this before? Can my actions speak louder?”

Another dimension of this is “talking smarter.” Share your struggles, not just your certainty. Is there a way that humor, a movie, or someone else can make a point better than I can? An often neglected corollary is that attentive listening can sometimes be more important than giving answers or opinions—no matter how short or smart. But remember, listening is not the same as just being quiet. Show that you understand.

All of this takes the self-discipline of patient restraint. It's tempting to want to pour out all your hard-won life's wisdom into your adult children. You may want to give them a leg up, save them from your own mistakes, or rescue them from an action you see as folly. Restrain yourself. Patience, prayer, and pondering will hopefully remind you that some lessons only stick when earned through trial and error. Learn to wait.

Emotions can both motivate and incapacitate us. Joy and peacefulness are beautiful, but it is the negative emotions of worry, sadness, disappointment, fear, and anger that often block the love that we want to flow from one generation to another. It's easy to see God working in the happy emotions, and we are grateful. The negative emotions take more depth of faith. Thus, mindfulness of emotions starts with identifying the emotion that's blocking my love,

acknowledging its validity, and then moving through it. Virtuous actions might include reserving judgment on what seems to be a negative behavior, forcing yourself to see the good in your child despite him or her taking a path different than what you had hoped, forgiving your adult child, forgiving yourself.

Jesus showed us the ultimate expression of love when he surrendered his life for us. Most of us are not called to sacrifice our lives for our children— but wait, yes we are! I’m not talking about physical death, but about the self-sacrifice of dying to our ego. It’s human to want to be right, to win, to be thought well of. But just as “unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit” (Jn 12:24), so too, if we parents are to become our best selves and serve our children well, we must strip ourselves of biases and self-righteousness. This isn’t easy and might take further self-education, listening to voices that differ from our own, and then discerning what is really true versus what is just tradition or pop culture. Underneath all of this is honest humility. What a sacrifice it can be.

So let’s say you’ve been working the virtues, but not yet feeling very consoled or hopeful. Consider that sometimes one has to lose faith in order to find it. Often it’s a matter of moving from an inherited faith, through a time of wandering, to eventually recognize that something essential is missing in life. That essential element is a deeper awareness that the things of this world are not enough to satisfy. Sometimes this searching for the divine comes through a health, job, or family crisis. Sometimes it just comes from feeling empty. It takes time—and it’s God’s time, not my time. Trust God.

As we journey with our adult children through life transitions, it’s tempting to want to fix our children or make them over into our image of the perfect human being. Ultimately, we are called to love each child just as God loves us—in all our human beauty and imperfections. It is your job to keep loving your child, no matter what. What follows are some tips for parents as their adult children move through life.

7 TIPS FOR SUCCESS

1. When adult children return home, share your expectation and limits.
2. Choose your battles.
3. Support independence
4. Support your adult child’s choice of mate.
5. Don’t advise unless directly asked.
6. Respond to a young adult in crisis with compassion, plus a plan for the future.
7. Don’t beat yourself up.

They’re Coming to Be with Us!

When adult children return home, share your expectations and limits, whether it be for holidays, vacation, or longer. If it’s for a while, be clear on how long “a while” is. What will happen if they drop out of school or want to live at home to save money, or if their lifestyle conflicts with your values? (Think study habits—or lack thereof—partying, sex, drugs, alcohol.) You will always love them, but you don’t always have to house them.

Choose your battles, so that you don’t drive them away. If they are away at school, the messiness of their dorm room or which church they go to is small potatoes. Save your energy for crucial things like: Are they kind and fair? Are they seeking a spiritual grounding for their life? Are they people of integrity? Ultimately, we need to return our young adults into God’s hands. Pray. Become friends with St. Monica. She understands.

Some parents are perpetual fixers. When you want to help out, ask yourself, “Will this action be a step toward my child becoming more independent, or will it foster continuing dependence on me?” For example, paying off a child’s credit card debt is a short-term fix and makes you his or her banker of first resort. Conversely, paying tuition to finish a degree empowers a child to become more financially independent.

Then there is the biggie—selection of a (hopefully) lifelong mate. One wise friend of mine is fond of saying that we parents are not the Selection Committee, we’re the Welcoming Committee! Support your adult child’s choice of a mate.

Not everyone marries, nor should they, but this is your child’s life partner, not yours. If you have serious reservations, you might voice your concern once and explain why, but assure your children that you will fully accept whomever they choose. If, sadly, the marriage does not last, banish “I told you so” from your speech. Your child needs your support, not your judgment.

On a similar note, don’t advise your adult child unless directly asked. Whether about a job, a mate, or parenting, your advice will more likely be heard if you wait for the “ask.”

For example, as a seasoned parent or maybe a grandparent, you’ve certainly had decades of child-rearing experience and hopefully you were pretty good at it. But times have changed. Let them make their own mistakes. You did.

One exception: if there is a life-threatening situation or someone might get seriously hurt—emotionally or physically—you can and should intervene. If your beloved young adult is in crisis, respond with compassion plus a plan for the future. This means your child knows you will love him or her no matter what, but you will not buy drugs, pay off debts, make excuses, or house him or her forever. Forgive, but verify. Some young adults (such as grown children with intellectual, emotional, or physical disabilities) may need your support for longer than others.

No matter what is happening with your adult child, don’t beat yourself up! Regardless of how well or poorly you assess your job as a parent, remember: *You are responsible for the process you use in raising your child, not the outcome.* Even if you aren’t so sure you did a good job on the process, the corollary to this maxim is: *You did the best you could with what you knew at the time.* God still loves you and your adult child. And God will guide him or her in God’s own way.

Remember, all parents always have room for improvement. You are a good parent, and God continuously offers you the opportunity to grow in love with your children as they make life’s journey. Enjoy!

Susan Vogt is a speaker and writer on marriage, parenting, spirituality, and simple lifestyle. She and her husband, Jim, live in Covington, Kentucky. They have four adult children. Her website is www.SusanVogt.net and her Living Lightly blog is at www.SusanVogt.net/blog.