

# *Finding Joy in Parenting Adult Children*

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1. Responsibilities of parenting young children are quite clear.

*Parents have a sacred duty to rear their children in love and righteousness, to provide for their physical and spiritual needs, to teach them to love and serve one another, to observe the commandments of God and to be law-abiding citizens wherever they live. (Proclamation on the Family)*

- Provide children with basic necessities.
- Teach children the gospel.
- Nurture children.
- Discipline children.
- Worry.

2. What do you do after your children are reared?

- Adult child-parent relationships are more common today than previously.
  - 1900: 22% of 40-year-olds had both parents alive.
  - 2000: 59% of 40-year-olds have both parents alive.
  - 2000: Only 20% of 50-year-olds do not have a living parent.
- Transition to adulthood generally leads to improved parent-child relationships.

- Transition to adulthood today is more prolonged and uneven than previously.
- Adult child-parent relationships are complex and ambiguous.

Responsibilities of parenting adult children are much more vague. There are fewer clear-cut guidelines. However, with people living longer in today's society, statistics show that most parents will spend *twice* as much time as a parent to an adult child than they did when the child was young and living at home. It is important, therefore, to gain a better understanding of the principles relating to healthy parent-adult child relationships.

3. Understanding the transition of children to adulthood will help parents understand their role as parents to adult children.

*Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh* (Genesis 2:24).

The Lord teaches that children must *leave* their parents and *cleave* (become united and one) with their spouse. It is an eternal law of the gospel, as well as a principle in family science, that couples must leave their parents and become adults before they can ever develop a healthy, united marriage.

What does it mean to leave and cleave?

*Determine that there will never be anything that will come between you that will disrupt your marriage. Be fiercely loyal one to another.* (President Gordon B. Hinckley, *Ensign*, Feb. 1999, pp. 2, 4).

*Being human, you may someday have differences of opinion resulting even in little quarrels. Neither of you will be so unfaithful to the other as to go back to your parents or friends and discuss with them your little differences. That would be gross disloyalty. Your intimate life is your own and must not be shared with or confided in others. You will not go back to your people for sympathy, but will thresh out your own difficulties* (President Spencer W. Kimball, *Marriage*, p. 25).

*Frequently, people continue to cleave unto their mothers and their fathers, and their chums. Sometimes, mothers will not relinquish the hold they have had upon their children, and husbands as well as wives return to their mothers and fathers to obtain advice and counsel and to confide, whereas cleaving should be to the wife in most things, and all intimacies should be kept in great secrecy and privacy from others.*

*Couples do well to immediately find their own home, separate and apart from that of the in-laws on either side. The home may be very modest and unpretentious, but still it is an independent domicile. Your married life should become independent of her folks and his folks. You love them more than ever, you cherish their counsel, you appreciate their association, but you live your own lives, being governed by your decisions, by your own prayerful considerations after you have received the counsel from those who should give it. . . .*

. . . *Brothers and sisters, may I say this is the word of the Lord. It is very, very serious, and there is nobody who should argue with the Lord. . . . He set the program, and we are not intelligent enough or smart enough to be able to argue him out of these important things. He knows what is right and true.* (President Spencer W. Kimball, *Ensign*, March 1977, pp. 4, 5)

*There may be a temptation to economize by living with the parents on either side. Do not make this serious error. Well-meaning relatives have broken up many a home. Numerous divorces are attributable to the interference of parents who thought they were only protecting their loved children. Live in your own home even though it be a modest cottage or a tent. Live your own life.* (President Spencer W. Kimball, *Marriage*, p.17)

Leaving home and cleaving to a spouse, then, include the following changes:

- Independence
- Shift in loyalty
- Shift in confidant role
- Creation of marital boundaries

4. As children grow up and marry, their relationship with their parents shifts from a hierarchal relationship where the parents supervise and have power over their children to a more equal, nonhierarchal relationship. Parents of adult children no longer have authority over them. Of course, the children should still honor their parents, but the parents no longer seek to control their children. As parents and children treat each other as adults, their relationship becomes closer.

The key to establishing an adult-to-adult relationship between parents and adult children is the *principle of reciprocity*. The formal definition of reciprocity is the “norm of returning favors.” When children are young, parents sacrifice and help their children in many ways. That is the way it should be, with parents nurturing their children. However, as the children become adults, they should reciprocate nurturing interactions, kind acts service, and assistance. These acts of reciprocity create a fundamental shift in the relationship that will be much **more satisfying** for both parents and adult children.

Sometimes children want their parents to treat them like adults, but they fail to follow the principle of reciprocity. This leads to “the Santa Clause Syndrome,” where children continue to expect their parents to provide them with assistance and nurturance without offering either in return. These types of relationships are rarely satisfying to either the parents or the adult child, and they harm the adult child’s marital relationship.

5. What should parents do when they know that their adult child should be an independent adult, but he or she needs financial assistance? The Church teaches that parents should provide financial and material assistance to adult children in accordance with established Church welfare principles.

*We expect the individual to do all he can to help himself. . . . that the relatives will do all they can to help, then the Church steps in with commodities from the storehouse, with fast offerings to meet their needs that commodities from the storehouse will not supply* (President Harold B. Lee, *Teachings of Harold B. Lee*, p. 306).

*Ever since I have been in this Church I have never suffered a relative to be maintained by the Church. But some men and women cast their children and other relatives upon the Church. If one has an aged sister who cannot maintain herself, he passes her over to the Church; or if an aged father or mother, why, “let the Church . . . take care of them and provide for them.” It is a disgrace to every man and woman that has sense enough to live, not to take care of their own*

*relatives, their own poor, and plan for them* (President Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, 8, 145).

*I would like to quote from the welfare handbook some of us used as bishops over twenty years ago: "Aid from Relatives: Obviously no person should become a charge upon the public [or the Church] when his relatives are able to care for him. Every consideration of kinship, of justice and fairness, of the common good, and even of humanity itself, requires this." Then listen to these words: "Where Church relatives, financially competent to take care of their kin, refuse to do so, the matter should be reported to the bishop of the ward in which such relatives reside." (Elder H. Burke Peterson, *Ensign*, May 1981, p. 82).*

This help, though, needs to be offered in ways that are consistent with Church welfare principles. These principles are best summarized by President Heber J. Grant:

*Our primary purpose was to set up, in so far as it might be possible, a system under which the curse of idleness would be done away with, the evils of a dole abolished, and independence, industry, thrift and self respect be once more established amongst our people. The aim of the Church is to help the people to help themselves. Work is to be re-enthroned as the ruling principle of the lives of our Church membership* (President Heber J. Grant, *Conference Report*, October 1936, p. 3).

Thus, help from parents to adult children should be based on the principles of Church welfare.

- Discourage idleness.
- Discourage the dole.
- Encourage independence.
- Encourage thrift.
- Encourage industry and work.
- Short-term assistance is best.
- Sustain life, not lifestyle.

Assistance from parents to adult children that does not follow these God-given principles will undermine the parent-adult child relationship and keep the child in a dependent, nonadult situation.

6. So what are the guidelines for parenting adult children?

--Norm of noninterference

--Family National Guard

---must be called out by others, not themselves

---temporary

7. Because parent-adult child relationships are ambiguous, it is crucial for parents and adult children to clarify expectations. Markman and Stanley from the University of Denver have advised us to

- Be aware.

- Be clear.
- Be reasonable.

8. It is important for parents and adult children to communicate with each other often and effectively. Making assumptions and having unspoken expectations will typically lead to frustration and conflict in the relationship.

- Keep confidences.
- Don't make assumptions.
- Communicate expectations of each other.
- Hold extended family councils when necessary.
- Resolve conflict according to gospel principles.  
Deal with problems directly.

*Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift (Matt. 5:23–24).*

*Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother (Matt. 18:15).*

- Accept responsibility for faults and wrongdoings.
- Forgive each other freely.

*My disciples, in days of old, sought occasion against one another and forgave not one another in their hearts; and for this evil they were afflicted and sorely chastened. Wherefore, I say unto you, that ye ought to forgive one another; for he that forgiveth not his brother his trespasses standeth condemned before the Lord; for there remaineth in him the greater sin. I, the Lord, will forgive whom I will forgive, but of you it is required to forgive all men (D&C 64:8–10)*

9. Parents of adult children who have made poor decisions need to continue to love their children and pray for their eventual return.

*A child, even one raised with great love and care and carefully taught, may choose, when an adult, not to follow those teachings for a variety of reasons. How should we react? We understand and respect the principle of agency. We pray that life's experiences will help them regain their desire and ability to live the gospel. They are still our children, and we will love and care about them always. We do not lock the doors of our house nor the doors to our hearts (Elder Robert D. Hales, *Ensign*, Nov. 1993, p. 10).*

*My message . . . is one of hope and solace to heartbroken parents who have done their best to rear their children in righteousness with love and devotion, but have despaired because their child has rebelled or been led astray to follow the path of evil and destruction. In contemplating your deep anguish, I am reminded of the words of Jeremiah, "A voice was heard in Ramah, . . . Rachel weeping for her children refused to be comforted." To this the Lord gave this welcome*

reassurance, “Refrain thy voice from weeping, . . . for thy work shall be rewarded . . . they shall come again from the land of the enemy (Jer. 31:15–16)” (President James E. Faust, “Dear Are the Sheep That Have Wandered,” *Ensign*, May 2003, p. 61).

*The Prophet Joseph Smith declared—and he never taught more comforting doctrine—that the eternal sealings of faithful parents and the divine promises made to them for valiant service in the Cause of Truth, would save not only themselves, but likewise their posterity. Though some of the sheep may wander, the eye of the Shepherd is upon them, and sooner or later they will feel the tentacles of Divine Providence reaching out after them and drawing them back to the fold. Either in this life or the life to come, they will return. They will have to pay their debt to justice; they will suffer for their sins; and may tread a thorny path; but if it leads them at last, like the penitent Prodigal, to a loving and forgiving father’s heart and home, the painful experience will not have been in vain. Pray for your careless and disobedient children; hold on to them with your faith. Hope on, trust on, till you see the salvation of God (Elder Orson F. Whitney, Conference Report, Apr. 1929, p. 110).*

*If the repentance of the wayward children does not happen in this life, is it still possible for the cords of the sealing to be strong enough for them yet to work out their repentance? In the Doctrine and Covenants we are told, “The dead who repent will be redeemed, through obedience to the ordinances of the house of God. And after they have paid the penalty of their transgressions, and are washed clean, shall receive a reward according to their works, for they are heirs of salvation (D&C 138:58–59)” (President James E. Faust, “Dear Are the Sheep That Have Wandered,” *Ensign*, May 2003, p. 61).*

9. So how do we parent adult children? These principles suggest that it is different than parenting young children. We should:

- Instead of providing necessities for children, encourage their independence.
- Continue to teach them the gospel and allow them to teach the gospel to you.
- Enjoy reciprocal nurturing with them.
- Don’t try to control them.
- Continue to worry about them.

10. Following these principles will help parents experience satisfaction and joy in their relationships with their adult children.

#### Suggested Readings:

James E. Faust, “Dear Are the Sheep That Have Wandered,” *Ensign*, May 2003, pp. 61–64.

Garth A. Hanson, “Once Children Grow Up,” *Ensign*, Feb. 1996, pp. 23–26, 29.

Garth A. Hanson, “In-Law Etiquette,” *Ensign*, Jan. 1997, pp. 71, 72.

Robert F. Stahmann, “I Have a Question,” *Ensign*, Mar. 1979, p. 45.