

Published May 26th, 2021

Family Focus

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more sidelined and less essential. We know this development is healthy and necessary for a child's well-being. But if we have always derived comfort and satisfaction in being needed by our children, we may feel somewhat displaced as they evolve into independent adults.

"Raising children is a spur-of-the-moment seat-of-the-pants sort of deal, as any parent knows, particularly after an adult child says that his most searing memory consists of an offhand comment in the car on the way to second grade that the parent cannot even dimly recall."
~ Anna Quindlen

It's often not easy to watch our children grow up and seemingly need us less and less. Of course, parenting is full of times when we must gradually let go and help our kids become as independent as possible. Whether it's your child's first day of preschool or kindergarten or their first experience driving on their own, parents must continually try to adapt and accept their child's progression in life. Some welcome their child becoming more self-sufficient, whereas others miss the early childhood years. Each parent differs as to which stage of childhood they enjoyed the most. But almost all can agree that they miss many aspects of their children's earlier years as they witness their passage into adulthood.

We no longer have the same influence and control, and often we're no longer the most significant people in our adult children's lives. We go from being the center of their universe when they are little to gradually feeling

As in most relationships, it's important to find middle ground instead of being extreme in one way or another. Katy, age 67, was a recently divorced mother of two grown daughters. She and one of her daughters wanted help with repairing their relationship. Alison lived close by to her mother and was married with two small children. Katy's other daughter lived in another state and had infrequent contact with her mother.

Katy felt hurt and abandoned when her husband left her for another woman. Her self-esteem took a nosedive. She became very dependent upon Alison for companionship and emotional support. Katy called Alison several times a day and wanted to be with her as much as possible each weekend. Prior to this time, Katy and Alison had a good and close relationship. But Katy's needs became overwhelming for Alison, who was already managing her kids and a full-time job.

As a caring daughter, Alison recognized that her mom needed a lot of support during this difficult time. She wanted to help, but she gradually started to resent the conscious and unconscious demands her mother placed on her. Along with resentment, Alison felt guilt for being so reluctant to accommodate her mother.

For her part, Katy was so consumed with her own grief that she wasn't thinking about how much she was leaning on Alison. And since Alison had difficulty speaking up for herself, she behaved in a passive-aggressive manner - either waiting a day or two to return her mom's phone calls or often being short-tempered and rude when she was with her mom.

Their work in therapy was clear-cut; they needed to communicate directly with each other about their needs and expectations. Ultimately, Katy was able to see how her increased dependence on Alison adversely affected their relationship, and she looked for other ways to find additional support and rebuild her life.

It's a good idea to assess your relationship with your adult children periodically to determine if everyone is comfortable with the amount of contact and communication you have with each other. It helps to have a direct conversation, and preface it by saying it's important for you to know how they feel so you can make any necessary adjustments. You can assure them that you won't take it personally (and hopefully you won't). Since most parents' ultimate goal is to have a close and positive relationship with their adult children, you will be paving the way.

In the next column, we'll look at an example of the opposite situation: an adult child who would like more time with her parents, but the parents have flown the coop - literally and figuratively.

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