



Family | Parenting

Parenting Adult Children: How to Support Without Overstepping

Michelle Seitzer

Published: October 15, 2020

Updated: November 30, 2020

9 min read

Tags for this article: [Grandparenting](https://extramile.thehartford.com/tag/grandparenting/) | [Parenting Adult Children](https://extramile.thehartford.com/tag/parenting-adult-children/) | [Relationships](https://extramile.thehartford.com/tag/relationships/)

Last year we published a piece called [Adult Children: The Guide to Parenting Your Grown Kids](https://extramile.thehartford.com/family/parenting/parenting-adult-children/) (<https://extramile.thehartford.com/family/parenting/parenting-adult-children/>). Many readers responded by sharing their intensely difficult situations with adult children. Comments included everything from financial challenges to “sudden flights from the nest,” disagreements with spouses about [family](https://extramile.thehartford.com/family/) (<https://extramile.thehartford.com/family/>) dynamics, concerns about mental health, disappointments about career paths and more. And these struggles and heartbreaks are often magnified when grandchildren come into the picture.

Numbers Rise, Roles Change: A Profile of Modern Grandparents



First, let’s look at the numbers. In 2014, [Census data reported](https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2017/demo/p70br-147.pdf) (<https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2017/demo/p70br-147.pdf>) a total of

69.5 million US grandparents, up from 65.1 million in 2009. And as more boomers become grandparents, the tally will likely surpass 70 million.

According to a [2018 survey by AARP](#)

(https://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/research/surveys_statistics/life-leisure/2019/aarp-grandparenting-study.doi.10.26419-2Fres.00289.001.pdf), one in 10 grandparents live in the same household as their grandchildren. Five percent of those grandparents serve as their primary caregiver. One in 10 grandparents takes care of their grandchildren by babysitting. And many grandparents provide financially for their grandchildren—like gifts to help with daily costs and educational support.

But what's the biggest challenge facing today's grandparents? Disagreements with their own adult children over parenting styles. The AARP survey supports this divide. Their results reported a majority of grandparents "view their parenting style to be superior to parents of today."

Juxtaposed with the happy reality of grandparents living longer, healthier lives—which allows them to have longer relationships with their grandchildren than previous generations—these differing views can result in frustration, tension and even total estrangement.

While every situation is unique and the answers are not always cut and dry, we'll offer five ways to support your children and grandchildren.

5 Ways to Be a Supportive Parent and Grandparent

Knowing when to step back and when to step in is tricky. Here's how both industry experts and experienced grandparents recommend staying involved without going too far.

1. Discuss Expectations and Pain Points with Your Partner

While you might not always agree with each other on methods, it's important to listen to your spouse and hear them out. This is especially important in blended families, when the adult child is from a spouse's previous marriage. You've committed to grandparenting and parenting

your adult children together, so you both get a say in the way you engage with your families.

Choose a time to sit down and talk about the kids and grandkids—even if you’ve never done it before. Talk about your hopes, desires and fears about parenting and grandparenting. Be open and honest about your expectations. Talk about the things you’re struggling with in the relationships with your kids. Let them know about the ways you feel rejected or how you don’t want to be last on the list. Talk to them about how you hate watching them struggle and just want to intervene.

Discuss the things that bother you about your kids’ parenting styles, but also celebrate the things they’re doing well. Maybe your husband hates the way your son talks to you, but he doesn’t understand your history. By getting on the same page as much as possible, you’ll be able to face challenges and conflicts as a team and prevent divisions among children and grandchildren.

Read more: [What to Do When Your Adult Kids Keep Fighting](https://extramile.thehartford.com/family/parenting/arguing-adult-kids/)

(<https://extramile.thehartford.com/family/parenting/arguing-adult-kids/>)

2. Understand Where They’re Coming From

You can respectfully disagree with your adult kids about their parenting style, approach to discipline, and general lifestyle differences, but listen to their reasoning and try to understand it.

Sometimes, the differences in parenting styles seem more drastic than they actually are. Parenting is a sensitive issue and an emotionally charged one. Keep this in mind: Your child may be struggling with parenting because of differences in how a spouse was raised.

Perhaps you offered to help with cleaning your daughter’s house while she’s at work and your grandson is napping. While she might be used to your style of cleaning, her husband was frustrated when he couldn’t find things where he’d left them (and he may have grown up in a home where things weren’t always neat and tidy). Instead of throwing your hands up in

defeat, suggest something else. Maybe you can help with meal prep, laundry or cleaning windows and floors.

Another example: maybe your son prefers your approach to discipline over his partner's (she may have grown up in a home with a more relaxed way of managing behaviors). Steer clear of taking sides or pushing your agenda, as this can drive a wedge in their relationship. It could also lead them to reject your help with childcare. This doesn't mean you have to let your granddaughter run the show when you're there, but be careful not to override her parents' wishes—or undermine their authority—when it comes to discipline.

3. Ask Your Kids What They'd Find Most Helpful

Most parents want to help their children and grandchildren—no matter how old they are. And that's OK! But as they grow, their needs change. Your way of helping should shift accordingly.

It may take some time to find the best way to be helpful without interfering, hovering or enabling. Your adult child may be trying to assert themselves and claim independence, but if you're always coming to his or her aid in the ways *you* think are best, you'll delay that process. In other cases, your adult child is so independent you may think they don't need you at all. But they may just need your help in other ways.

Initiate conversations with the goal of helping without hindering. For example: "What's the hardest part of your parenting day?" If your daughter says bedtime, offer to help put your granddaughter to bed once a week. Or bring her to your home for a sleepover.

If they're struggling with a co-worker or boss, get their take on what might help. Be a listening ear instead of taking a "you shouldn't talk to him like that" tone. Share the ways you dealt with a difficult boss, or what worked for you in a frustrating co-worker relationship.

Take it a step further: ask your children for *their* opinions and advice, says Tina B. Tessina, Ph.D., psychotherapist and author of *The Ten Smartest Decisions a Woman Can Make After Forty*. "Even in early childhood, children can be encouraged to develop their own opinions about events and decisions you face as a family; as they get older you can ask for their

ideas about what to do,” says Tessina. “When your children become adults, you can request advice about work issues, investments or other concerns. Sharing advice as friends and equals will create the friendly connection you want,” she says.



4. Accept That Your Adult Children Can Think for Themselves

“When I had my first grandkid, I remembered having an argument with my son about how they were spoiling him too much, and he kept on insisting he wasn’t doing so,” says Ricardo Flores, whose eldest son is 33.

“It went on and on and we almost ruined Thanksgiving, but then we decided to talk it out and that’s when I learned that we are in different generations now, and what worked for me as a parent in the past might not be the best thing to apply to today’s generation,” says Flores, a financial advisor at The Product Analyst.

“Since then, I learned to keep my boundaries as a grandparent and let my son do the parenting for his kid, because it’s also how I would want it for myself,” he says. “The point is that we as parents should understand that our kids will grow, and the time will come when they stop asking for us—and eventually, their kids will ask for them.”

It can be difficult to build good and harmonious relationships with your children because they will make different choices, says Flores. “But you have to accept that they can think on their own already. Children don’t stop becoming our children, and parenting does not stop the moment they become adults. There will always be differences, and we must learn to accept and adapt to that.”

5. Focus on the Things You Can Contribute

You see your grandson struggling with a lack of structure. You’ve tried confronting your son and daughter-in-law about it, and it only leads to harsh words and hurt feelings. But that shouldn’t stop you from having a healthy relationship with your grandson.

When he comes to your house or you take him out somewhere, find ways to give him the structure he needs without making a big show of it or throwing his parents under the bus. For example, say this: “I made a picture schedule of what we’re doing today!” not this, “Since your mom never has a plan, I took charge and made this list.”

Maybe you have strict instructions on the “don’t dos” from your kids, and it makes you feel limited as a grandparent. All is not lost. Think about what your grandkids love and what makes them tick. Focus on cultivating those hobbies and engaging them in their interests. Leave your frustrations about your adult child out of the picture.

Share with your children on a parent-to-parent basis, suggests Tina B. Tessina. “If your children have children of their own, you have expertise they can benefit from, but be willing to learn from them as well,” says Tessina. “If they’re reading books or taking courses on parenting, discuss the information as you would with another parent your own age,” she says. “If they parent their children differently than you did, don’t take it as a personal affront, and don’t interfere unless you’re asked to.”

How to Be a Supportive Parent of an Adult Child: Dating, Relationships and Money

Maybe there are no grandchildren in the picture yet, or maybe the struggles are less about the grandkids and more about your adult children's relationship patterns or financial struggles. Here's what worked for these parents:

Let Them Make Their Own Decisions

Nancy Burger, 59, is an experienced writer and author of the parenting book, *A Special Kind of Brain*. She's struggled with finding the right balance in offering advice versus overstepping with her adult son and daughter. She's especially had a hard time when it comes to their dating and relationships.

Her daughter, 23, recently started dating someone new. "Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't ask many questions and would wait for her to share information as the relationship unfolds," says Burger. "But given the ongoing risk of contracting COVID-19, I find myself keenly interested in the young man's travel patterns and social circles."

What has worked for Burger? "The trick has been to inquire without sounding meddlesome or nosy, but instead, appealing to my daughter's sense of responsibility," she says. For example, when she recently mentioned a plan to join him on a trip to New York City to meet some of his friends, Burger asked her how she felt about the potential health risks, Burger explains. "She assured me that they would socially distance, that her risk of contracting the virus would be low."

"While I was careful to acknowledge and validate her response, I added that I would not feel comfortable being in close quarters with her after a trip to the city and would feel compelled to maintain a two-week separation. This was unpalatable to her, and she decided not to go," says Burger.

"By focusing my comments on my own experience and the boundaries I would have to set, I avoided directives about what she should or shouldn't do," Burger explains. "This is a subtle but powerful difference that allows our adult children to make informed decisions on their own."



Stay in Your Lane

Lizbeth Meredith, 55, is an author and probation supervisor from Anchorage, Alaska. “Overstepping is my middle name,” she says. “My oldest daughter turned 33 recently and asked that I not nag her for the entire day. I had no idea if we’d have anything to say,” Meredith says. As a single-mom, Meredith wrapped her entire life around her girls. “We had a lot of tragedy and hardships, but we kept moving forward,” she says. But when the girls grew up, Meredith felt like she was left behind. “But my therapist friend told me to visualize not driving in another lane. ‘Stay in your lane!’ she says. If only it were that easy.” Meredith wrote a funny essay published in the HerStories Project about [Conscious Unhovering](https://www.herstoriesproject.com/2018/05/conscious-unhovering/) (<https://www.herstoriesproject.com/2018/05/conscious-unhovering/>), which explained the pain of both sides—overstepping and staying in your lane. “I keep trying to do exactly that. And I’m doing better,” she says.

Pay Attention to the Balance of Your Interaction

As a parent, the role of nurturer and caretaker is familiar, and perhaps comfortable, for both you and your children, says Tina B. Tessina. But you don't want to foster that relationship when your children are grown.

“Don't let your part in the relationship slide into all giving (or all receiving),” she advises. “Remember, the objective is to create a friendship with your children. If your children always seem ready to take from you, make some suggestions of what they can do in return.”

More Resources for the Journey of Parenting Your Adult Kids

We know that navigating life with your adult children isn't easy—but there is much joy to be found in being a parent and grandparent. That's why we've created these guides to help you through this complicated stage of parenthood.

- [Adult Children: The Guide to Parenting Your Grown Kids](https://extramile.thehartford.com/family/parenting/parenting-adult-children/)
(<https://extramile.thehartford.com/family/parenting/parenting-adult-children/>),
- [What to Do When Your Adult Kids Keep Fighting](https://extramile.thehartford.com/family/parenting/arguing-adult-kids/)
(<https://extramile.thehartford.com/family/parenting/arguing-adult-kids/>)
- [Who Will Care For My Special Needs Adult Child?](https://extramile.thehartford.com/family/parenting/caring-for-my-special-needs-adult-child/)
(<https://extramile.thehartford.com/family/parenting/caring-for-my-special-needs-adult-child/>)
- [Boomerang Kids: When Adult Children Move Back Home](https://extramile.thehartford.com/family/parenting/boomerang-kids/)
(<https://extramile.thehartford.com/family/parenting/boomerang-kids/>),
- [How to Embrace the Empty Nest](https://extramile.thehartford.com/family/parenting/empty-nest/)
(<https://extramile.thehartford.com/family/parenting/empty-nest/>),
- [Giving Money to Grown Children: When to Stop and How to Break the Habit](https://extramile.thehartford.com/family/parenting/adult-children-finances/) (<https://extramile.thehartford.com/family/parenting/adult-children-finances/>),

You're not alone! Find comfort in community. Tell us how you've handled a difficult situation as a grandparent or parent of an adult child. Share a question about how to better manage your role.

Your Policy, Your Way

Manage your policy quickly and securely online.

Feedback

7 Responses to "Parenting Adult Children: How to Support Without Overstepping"

Alma Cuka | November 30, 2020 at 10:04 pm [Reply](#)

It was really interesting topic and helpful of others sharing their life with adult.

Jenny | November 17, 2020 at 9:35 pm [Reply](#)

Be sure to stay in your own lane.

Barb Kelly | November 7, 2020 at 4:13 pm [Reply](#)

I have an adult daughter with mental illness. She is cruel to her 3 boys and delights in seeing that it causes great anguish and stress for me. She is jealous of everything including my relationship with my grandsons and, therefore let's me see them only when she's involved it's so difficult to be around her that we have barely spoken and I have not been able to take the boys for almost a year. Any suggestions??

Pam Kepford | November 7, 2020 at 12:37 pm [Reply](#)

My 40 year old son, unmarried no kids, was forced home from overseas due to the pandemic. His father loaned him a car and he is living in my basement. It was very hard for him to lose a great professional position and return, dependent. He is doing agricultural work now...

It's very hard for me to have a disaffected adult child inserted into my quiet retirement. We have made it over the initial bumps and I appreciate all the articles available, but they were written pre-pandemic in more hopeful times. Maybe some more advice germane to current times and changing needs.

Suzanne LaVoie | November 7, 2020 at 10:24 am [Reply](#)

Wow. I found this article to be very helpful, seeing how others cope with their adult children!

Joanie Dwelle Anaya | November 6, 2020 at 9:16 pm [Reply](#)

My grown son and I are great friends. We have experienced many tragedies and many joyous times. While divorced from the mother of his children, I maintain open dialogue with my former daughter-in-law. By doing so, it shows my grown grandchildren a positive example, and there is a healthy relationship

with my grandkids. No barriers. I was a 'stand back' MIL while they were married. Thus, I was always invited in.

Toni Mariani, Author | October 23, 2020 at 10:20 am

[Reply](#)

My daughter lives 2000 miles away. The laws on prescribed drugs are different here than there. More free thinkers there, and Bible Belt here. I thought it was lack of love for me that kept her from visiting, until she expressed herself and said, the drug laws are keeping us apart! In one way I felt relief, and another way I felt pity and sadness that she had a problem.

The Hartford Center for Mature Market Excellence®

Find information from our experts about being safe on the road and at home.

Visit the Center (<https://www.thehartford.com/resources/mature-market-excellence>)

© 2023 The Hartford.

Additional Resources

[About Extra Mile](#)

[The Hartford](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Legal Notice](#)

[Accessibility Statement](#)

[Important Information About Third Party Resources](#)

[Homeowners Insurance](#)

A blue triangular button with the word "Feedback" written in white, slanted upwards from left to right.

[Car Insurance](#)

[Renters Insurance](#)

[Umbrella Insurance](#)

Brought to you by The Hartford. The content displayed is for information only and does not constitute an endorsement by, or represent the view of, The Hartford.

Information and links from this article are provided for your convenience only. Neither references to third parties, nor the provision of any link imply an endorsement or association between The Hartford and the third party or non-Hartford site, respectively. The Hartford is not responsible for and makes no representation or warranty regarding the contents, completeness, accuracy or security of any material within this article or on such sites. Your use of information and access to such non-Hartford sites is at your own risk. You should always consult a professional.

