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Chapter Four: Parenting an Emerging Adult - 101

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Chapter Four

Parenting an Emerging Adult - 101

You can't nag them into adulthood. The very nature of becoming an adult is such that no one can do it for you.

No unsolicited advice,

No pushing for change,

Respect for boundaries,

Attitude of genuine love and acceptance.

Have you seen the movie *Failure to Launch*, starring Sara Jessica Parker and Matthew McConaughey? It comically captures the frustrations of modern-day parents of emerging adults. In desperation to get their adult son out the door, the parents, played by Kathy Bates and Terry Bradshaw, go so far as to hire a coach to help them sever the steel umbilical cord. Ultimately, the son does get launched. But not without a few bumps and bruises along the way.

Those bumps and bruises. Can we avoid them or at least minimize them?

The short answer is: yes, we *can* avoid many of the rough spots and soften some of the others. But there is a caveat. We must be willing to brave some awkwardness and self-examination. We must be willing to adapt to new realities.

The two quotes at the top of the page offer wise and timeless counsel to parents. Alas, it is advice more easily said than done. On one hand, we all want to be loving and

supportive and avoid nagging, complaining or disrespecting our grown kids' boundaries. On the other hand, we're afraid that the more accepting and non-judgmental we become, the more comfortable our adult kids will get in our homes. And, let's face it, part of us doesn't *want* them to be too comfortable. We want them to be a little *uncomfortable*, so they'll be motivated to move on.

But does that strategy work? Is nurturing or pushing the best approach? Should we strive to be like the north wind of the old fable – trying to blow the traveler's coat off by sheer force? Or do we play the role of the sun – warming the traveler with our gentle rays until he decides to take his coat off on his own? Many of us go back and forth. We're as confused as our emerging adults seem to be. We're even confused about whether we really *want* them to leave the nest.

And our confusion isn't helping them a bit.

Leaving home has never been easy, for the leaver or the "leavee." But in this uncertain age, it is harder than ever. The rules are in flux. When should I encourage my child to seize the reins of adulthood? When does "support" turn into enabling? Should I *expect* my child to live with me longer than I did with my parents? Does that expectation then *create* the reality? What can I do to help my child be truly ready to leave when the time comes? Do I have an active role in this or a passive one?

We're looking for answers and there don't seem to be any out there. So what does that tell us? It tells us we have to come up with our own. And that's not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, that's the purpose of this chapter. Not to provide answers but to give you some ways of thinking about parenting that will help you *come up with your own*

answers, suited to your unique situation. And to give you a little encouragement and reassurance too. We can all use a little of that.

The Launching Pad

In the past, it wasn't really *necessary* to learn how to parent an emerging adult. At least on a long-term, everyday basis. Children left home at a younger age and by more predictable routes. And if they did stay in the home, the reason for doing so was usually made explicitly clear – perhaps to care for an aging parent or to help with a family business. This phenomenon of in-house parenting of emerging adults, with no firm exit strategy in mind, was not a widespread social reality in the past. Yes, it did occur, but only in isolated cases.

It seems appropriate to declare that a major new chapter of family life has now emerged; let's call it the Launching Pad period. (And the “pad,” unfortunately, is probably *yours*.) The Launching Pad period, formerly so short and sweet, didn't really *need* rules, now often stretches on for years. And most of us are unprepared for it. We don't know how to act, as parents. There's no historical precedent, so, in a sense, we're all winging it.

The sad part is that our relationship with our emerging adult may be suffering because of our confusion. And we don't want that either. We love our kids. Yes, we may be troubled by their reluctance to launch, but we still want to have healthy, enjoyable relationships with them. Is this possible?

Finding the Right Approach

For those who are feeling a bit flustered as parents of grown children – and that probably includes everyone reading this book - here is some reassurance. Relationships between emerging adults and their parents do *improve* over time. Tensions ease, communication improves, and awkwardness lessens. I invite you to hold on to this important finding, particularly in moments of despair. Your relationship with your emerging adult *will* get better. Research shows that, for the most part, they do grow up to become independent, productive adults! They do launch! And, they do so despite our bumbling and sabotaging.

In the last two chapters we looked at some of the new realities emerging adults are facing in their work and personal lives. Compared to *our* twenties, everything is more uncertain for them, less predictable. Due to the phenomenal speed of social and technological change, there is less clear sense about where the world is heading. Norms and guidelines have all but vanished.

That can be a good or a bad thing, depending upon how you look at it. On one hand, we parents find ourselves flying without instruments and that feels a bit scary. On the other hand, we have an unprecedented opportunity for creativity and innovation – for crafting our own unique family structures. Structures that actually work for us.

In the past, social pressure was on parents and children alike to follow predictable patterns - finish high school/college, get a job or get married, move out... Today, no longer bound by social expectations, we can do things our own way without fear of being judged or condemned. And that can be a very freeing idea. We can choose to form stronger and more satisfying bonds with our emerging adults than ever before. We can

create unique households and relationships tailor-made for the players involved. We no longer have to cram square pegs into round holes.

This chapter proceeds with that optimistic goal in mind.

As we get into the topic of *how* to be parents in the pre-launch era, here are a few questions to stimulate your thinking, and perhaps boost your confidence level.

- What other times in your past have you felt new to parenting or unsure about what to do in caring for your child? Perhaps when s/he was a baby and you were a new parent? Or when s/he encountered life obstacles unfamiliar to you?
- How were you able to overcome your fears of “not knowing” and remind yourself of all you *do* know?
- What steps did you take to protect, empower, or advocate for your child, even when you were unsure of the best ways to do this?
- Where did you get the information or support to take such steps?
- What does it say about you as a parent that you were motivated and able to tackle such difficult parenting challenges?
- As a parent, have you ever realized that, in the end, it is better to trust your instincts than any of the advice available from books, friends and TV experts?
- Who might have noticed your past parenting successes and would not have been surprised by them? What would that person say to you *now*, as you face your current parenting challenges?

When you think back on your history as a parent, you will probably realize that, to some extent, you've *always* been flying without instruments. From the time you first brought your infant home from the hospital, set her in her new crib and said to yourself, "Okay, NOW what do I do?" to the day you unexpectedly had to teach her about sexuality or personal safety, you've always been winging it, in a way. And you've probably been doing a pretty good job of it. Yes, you've undoubtedly made some errors, but you've learned from them and you've tried to correct them.

Know this: you have a lot more wisdom than you probably give yourself credit for. That wisdom hasn't abandoned you now. In fact, it's stronger than ever, because it's been seasoned by experience. You can trust that wisdom and trust the parenting *process*, too. You will make some missteps with your emerging adult, but ultimately, as long as you're committed to the process, the process is self-correcting. Whatever breaks *can* be fixed. As long as your eyes and your mind are open. You are better at this than you probably give yourself credit for.

With that in mind, it's time to take an honest look at your present parenting approach. Is it working for you? What do you like and dislike about the way you're handling your role as parent? It might be helpful to make a quick list of pros and cons. What are the things you are doing well and the things that you need to improve upon? Go ahead, write them down. It's good to look at them in black and white. No one else needs to see your list.

As you look at your "cons," you're probably feeling some pangs of guilt and incompetence. Don't be too hard on yourself - whatever failings you've identified, millions of other parents are experiencing them too. You are not alone.

Helicopter Parenting – a Common Mistake

As we look for fresh new approaches to parenting an emerging adult, let's start by looking at a new parenting trend that may sound familiar to you. The slang term, "helicopter parent," has been coined to describe it.

What is helicopter parenting? Well, many anxious parents, unsure of how to encourage independence, find themselves *hovering* over their emerging adults. They become over-involved and over-protective. They micro-manage their kids' day-to-day lives. Rather than let their emerging adults solve their own problems, they intervene at a moment's notice, "fixing" problems and foaming runways to prevent rough landings.

Helicopter parents stand in sharp contrast to the parents of many Boomers, who often kicked their kids out of the nest prematurely. This new breed of parent seems intent on prolonging the Launching Pad phase, despite protestations to the contrary. Helicopter parents have become such a notable intrusion in young adult life that The Wall Street Journal's CareerJournal.com reports that The University of Vermont hires student "parent bouncers" during registration in order to "redirect" parents and prevent them from attending. Other colleges have taken similar steps to prevent "helpful" parents from "helping." Such steps weren't necessary in the past.

Although parents of emerging adults are usually well-intentioned, many of them, especially those of the middle and upper classes, have become infantilizing, controlling and intrusive. They create family dynamics that are more appropriate for younger children and defeat the goal of independence. Helicopter parenting is the classic Catch-22 – parents perceive their children as less than fully competent, so they step in and

“handle” problems, thereby guaranteeing that their kids aren’t afforded a chance to grow up.

Of course, not all parents of emerging adults are helicopter parents. By no means. This pattern of parenting is increasingly common, though, and does resonate with the anxious, uncertain times in which we find ourselves.

In their attempts to micro-manage, helicopter parents tend to undermine their kids’ confidence and autonomy, setting in motion a cycle of dependency that can be debilitating. Emerging adults that are “hovered over” are often afraid to explore, experiment, and risk failure. Instead they look to Mom and Dad for answers, thus continuing the vicious cycle.

Let’s visit with Collin and his family to illustrate a fairly common scenario in which parents are unable to respond appropriately to the changing needs of their adult children.⁶ Collin, a software engineer, has moved back home in order to get some distance from his long-term relationship with his live-in girlfriend and perhaps find a little perspective in his life. Here’s Collin’s account of his new home adventure:

My presence endowed my parents’ home with an exciting purpose: to foster a child who didn’t need fostering. ...As I dressed for work each weekday morning, my mother interrogated me. She asked when I needed to leave, what I wanted for breakfast, if I wanted one of my dad’s multivitamins, when I would return, and what effect all this would have on the chicken dinner she was planning to prepare that evening.

My parents valiantly found solutions to *their interpretation* of my problems. When I talked about the high price of lunch, they eagerly bought me a pound of turkey. When they saw my clothes strewn about, they got me a wicker hamper. They washed my whites and colors – together - and dropped my work shirts off at the cleaners. They cleared spaces on shelves for me and collected my spare change in a cup.

According to Collin, his mother would frequently grill him about the status of his love life, and the answer *I don't know* "...was not an answer she understood." Boundary violations were flagrant. For example, one morning, upon noticing he was not up on time, she burst into his room exclaiming, "You're going to be late for work!" After telling her it was okay, she ignored his reassurances and asked, "What time do you have to be there?" Collin's response to her, predictably, was not one that might appear on a Hallmark Mother's Day card.

I could see that I was returning their assertive caretaking with outright resentment, but somehow I couldn't help myself. ...We were all stuck in the same bad sitcom together, re-enacting old roles we'd never explored to full potential. I was the defiant teenager I'd never been.

...Two months after I moved into their condo, I packed while they slept and left with as much of my stuff as I could jam into my Sentra. But I realize now that it wasn't their fault; they did the best they could. It was

just time for me to grow up, take some responsibility, and leave home for good.

Collin is now well on his way toward accepting adult responsibility for his life. Of course, he may still have some work to do in his relationship with his parents. After all, he left home in the dead of night in order to avoid them; not exactly an adult statement. But let's not rush to judgment regarding his behavior; perhaps he knows something we don't when it comes to his family dance. It seems, though, that both Collin and his parents still have some growing to do. This work may be more easily accomplished now that they are not all living under the same roof.

Landing the Copter

As parents, we all want our children to be engaged, connected, and self-assured. We want them to be able to navigate the complexity of the modern world and to have the resilience to work through setbacks. None of us *wants* to be over-involved, worried and intrusive. We'd *like* to land the helicopter, once and for all. However, our anxiety gets in the way. We worry about our kids' ability to "get it right," so we hover over them in our desire to protect. As in the case of Collin and his parents, we may even have trouble distinguishing between support and suffocation.

But why is it that we fear seeing our children make mistakes? After all, we know from our own experience that mistakes are our greatest teachers. Why can't we allow our kids the gift of committing major screw-ups and digging themselves out of their own holes? There are probably many reasons for this, but one of them almost certainly is this:

deep down, we *value* their dependence on us. Many of us *enjoy* playing the role of indispensable problem-solver. It satisfies *our* egos. It makes us feel important and needed. We don't fully *want* to relinquish the role of active parent. (We also don't like admitting this, so we blame our kids for their inability to mature.)

If we want our children to be truly independent, *we* need to be ready for that step ourselves and not be sending them mixed messages. One of the most powerful ways we can move in that direction is to allow our kids to make mistakes without rushing in to fix them. This requires a conscious act of stepping back and disengaging from the “fixing” process. It may feel painful and unnatural at first, but it is critically important. In the process of solving problems they themselves have created, emerging adults invariably learn much about themselves and become more confident in their abilities.

Their Needs or Ours?

Parents of emerging adults (*all* parents, actually) need to be crystal clear about their investment in their kids. How much of their worrying and criticizing is about their own needs and how much of it is about their kids'? Madeline Levine, in an insightful book titled *The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids*, offers the following observation:

Well-meaning parents contribute to problems in self-development by pressuring their children, emphasizing external measures of success, being overly critical, and being alternately emotionally unavailable or intrusive.

Becoming independent, and forging an identity becomes particularly difficult for children under these circumstances.

....[The process is] not aided when kids have to battle against parents who [are] implanting other, often unrealistic “selves” - stellar student, outstanding athlete, perfect kid - into their [child’s] psychological landscape.

It’s hard to parent an emerging adult without feeling we have a major stake in the outcome. But being overly invested in our children is counter-productive in the long run. We have to learn to let our kids go and not to be attached to any particular outcomes in their lives. Their lives are *their lives*. The more we detach from the results that *we* want to see, the more freely everyone can breathe – us and our kids.

Every time we hear ourselves complain about our emerging adult’s over-dependence on us, it’s a good opportunity to do a reality check. Are *we* really doing everything *we* can to let them go or are we encouraging their dependence by hovering, “fixing,” intruding and holding them to our standards rather than letting them develop their own?

Helicopter parenting is certainly not the only way we keep our kids in developmental limbo. We also use dictatorial, passive-aggressive, indifferent and submissive approaches that similarly fail to strike a balance between encouraging independence and enabling dependence. But let’s shift our focus to what *does* work.

The next section is about developing a parenting framework that works, and works for *you*. It is enhanced by the experiences of real parents of emerging adults and incorporates the wisdom they have gained along the way.

Finding a Framework

One of the primary tasks of parenthood is to separate, or differentiate, ourselves from our kids. But how do parents even begin to *think* about differentiating when their kids are still living in the home and/or when they, the parents, are acting overly-involved, intrusive, or meddling?

First let's look at things from a developmental point of view. William Aquilino, an expert and researcher in the field of parenting, speaks of the parent-child relationship as *evolving over time*. It is not a static thing. Being a parent remains a central part of your identity, no matter how old your children get, but different skills are called upon at different times, depending on the developmental challenges of your child.

Your child starts out as a helpless being, totally dependent on you. Then slowly, in fits and starts, s/he transforms into an adult who is capable of having a relationship based in mutual reciprocity, respect, and care. *You* have to change in order to support this metamorphosis. Your job is to read the new cues and to adapt to them. *This must always remain an active, conscious process*. What worked yesterday may no longer work today. Most of the problems parents create for themselves are due to getting stuck in old models that no longer work. We slip into familiar patterns and don't challenge ourselves to change them.

The most important thing parents can do is remain open-minded, alert to new cues, and light on their feet.

...old patterns of interaction may change when families enter a new life stage. ...The past influences but does not determine, the course of future intergenerational relationships.

Of course, familiar patterns will continue to be part of your relationship with your child. We don't reinvent ourselves or our relationships overnight. But you can and should look for opportunities to create new patterns of relating that more closely reflect your new mutual goals. This may involve taking concrete steps such as:

- Rescinding old rules regarding things like curfews, dating, room-cleaning, etc.
- Expecting greater financial contributions to the household
- Sharing household chores more fairly and developing ways of encouraging this that don't involve nagging
- Spending more time apart, doing fewer mutual activities
- Encouraging greater privacy by making changes to the physical layout of the home and to certain family "customs"
- Pulling back on parental services such as cooked meals, laundry, cleaning, etc.
- Reducing shared resources such as food and toiletries

- Encouraging your emerging adult to turn to friends and colleagues (rather than you) for advice and problem-solving

Leaving home has always served as an important landmark, an opportunity for renegotiating the relationship. It is trickier to renegotiate when your child is still living in the home, but still this renegotiating must occur. Parents must make changes to support the tender new shoots of maturity that appear. Your past relationship cannot dictate the present. You are given many opportunities to rewrite the story and you must seize them.

Emerging adults, over time, relinquish emotional dependency on their parents. This is natural. They become less interested in meeting our expectations and better at regulating their own behavior, their own emotional needs and their own self-esteem. The more thoroughly they can do that, the better the outcome. Your job is to *allow* that change to take place and not to sabotage it by sticking to outworn patterns.

The bottom line requirement is this: *your emerging adult needs to differentiate himself/herself from you, while maintaining loving contact with you.* Remaining emotionally available to your emerging adult while he/she is building a separate identity is no easy task. In fact, it can be quite a painful process, marked by bruised egos and hurt feelings. However, it is critical to do your best in this regard. The goal is to maintain a loving emotional bond with your child, while at the same time pulling back on the parental controls, the “fixing,” the judging, and the directing.

How Are *You* Doing?

How do you view *your* relationship with your son or daughter? Is there enough room for him/her to “differentiate?” Remember that, unlike adolescents, most emerging

adults aren't looking for "benign control." They don't want your help in structuring their day-to-day lives or in accomplishing tasks. So, what changes have you made in your relationship with your emerging adult that acknowledge this important shift? Have you made any? Can you think of ways you play your parental role differently than you did a few years ago? How is your current role different from the role you played as a parent of an adolescent? Are there further changes in these directions you might want to make? What are some ways you might surrender control without surrendering support?

One of the hardest things to figure out as a parent is whether the environment you provide is nurturing and encouraging "enough," or whether it is simply hostile or indulgent. Does it promote the development of a healthy, adult sense of self? Madeline Levine offers some possibilities for consideration. As you look at your own situation, are you fostering an environment in which your emerging adult is able to...

- Feel effective in the world?
- Have a sense of being in control of his/her life?
- Form deep and enduring relationships with others?
- Develop his/her own hobbies and interests?
- Value and accept himself/herself?
- Learn how to take care of himself/herself?

Sometimes metaphors can help us visualize the kind of relationship we are aiming for with our emerging adult. In my work with parents and emerging adults, two metaphors come up repeatedly – riding a bicycle and watering house plants. As you read the following sections, do either of these metaphors speak to you?

Riding a Bicycle

In teaching a child how to ride a bicycle there is a terrifying moment. You have to let go and trust that the child will be okay. At that moment of letting go, you may be panicking right down to your shoes. You may imagine your child being rushed to the Emergency Room and social workers storming your home. Yet you somehow get past your fears by trusting and hoping that your child will be okay. If s/he falls down, s/he will get up again. Maybe there'll be a few bruises, but in the process your child will learn to ride a bicycle.

Riding a bike is something you can't do for your child. Children must master the task on their own. They do this best by knowing they have a cheering squad behind them, knowing that a parent will pick them up and reassure them if they fall.

And they *will* fall. And some of the falls will be painful. But, as parents, we need to believe that they will get up and ride their bikes more skillfully the next time around. We cannot protect them from the pains of the mastery process, a process that involves experimentation, testing limits, and occasional failure. We must simply trust that they will pick themselves up again and learn from those experiences.

Believing in our adult children - that they will be okay, that they will heal, that they will skillfully "ride their bicycles" - helps us work through our anxieties and let go. At some point, blind faith comes into play. There is no other way. The good news is that the process is self-correcting. Our kids will fail and they will learn from the failures and mastery will emerge. Our job is just to be there emotionally when they fall off the bike. NOT to catch them or cushion their fall, but to encourage them to get back on the bike again.

Watering Plants

Watering plants is another way of thinking about the care we provide for our emerging adults.

In my private practice, I saw an emerging adult client, Deborah, who entered therapy because she was having trouble launching a career. Swamped with student loans and with limited financial resources, Deborah had moved in with her single-parent mother. The relationship between mother and daughter was a loving one, but Deborah felt suffocated. There was a good deal of what therapists call “enmeshment” – the blurring of healthy boundaries between two adults.

During treatment one day, Deborah’s mother spontaneously commented on the plants in my office. “They look so lush and healthy – what’s your secret?” I responded, with honesty and a tinge of guilt, that I wasn’t quite sure, but I thought it might have something to do with *benign neglect*. I told the mother that I sometimes forgot to water and mist the plants or to give them proper nutrients. I had learned through trial and error what each plant needed in order to thrive, but sometimes I was forgetful or distracted. The interesting thing was, the plants appeared forgiving, despite periods of mild negligence. I had learned to depend on that flexibility. But more importantly, I had learned to *believe* in their inherent resilience and to respond accordingly. The environment I provided was “good enough.” It was not perfect, but perfect *enough*.

Deborah’s mother was intrigued by my response. She reported that in her desire to have healthy house plants, she regularly and meticulously over-watered them. And they regularly perished. We didn’t speak about the plants again, but something

interesting began to happen in her relationship with Deborah. She changed her way of relating to her daughter, and stopped “over-watering.” Deborah, of course, thrived under these new conditions. Benign neglect did its job.

Many parents “over-water” in response to the anxiety-provoking world their kids are navigating. They want to get it perfect for them. But it is hard, if not impossible, to perfectly “titrate” our children’s environment. And it’s not even helpful in the long run. Anxious parents end up teaching their children to be unduly cautious (or to rebel by throwing caution to the wind). Over-watering is a posture that paints the world as a dangerous place that cannot be mastered without the help of significant others. And that’s not the message we want to send.

When thinking about what “good enough” parenting means, *under-watering*, at least some of the time, is probably the best way to go. Create conditions that allow your emerging adult to thrive, yes, but don’t obsess over the maintenance program. *Believe* in his/her ability to thrive under less-than-ideal conditions, knowing that this is how resiliency is built.

And keep your doubts to yourself.

Reason to Believe

Both of the metaphors I’ve suggested carry an underlying faith that our children *will* figure things out and that they will do so on their own timeline and their own terms. They will create lives that are meaningful to them if we let them. That means allowing them to *feel* our faith in them. Which, in turn, means backing off and giving them space to make their own decisions, *whether we think they’re right or not*.

Our children are masters at reading our anxieties. And so we must get those anxieties under control. We must learn to sever our attachment to things going the way *we* want. We need to trust that our kids will master the task of carving out their own identities in their own ways, building on their strengths and gifts. *There is no better approach.*

The next section will provide some reassuring and helpful words from real parents of emerging adults. First, a few facts to anchor you:

1. Nowadays it takes emerging adults approximately five to ten years to make the shift from their parents' home to their own. An increasing number of young adults return home with the intent of moving out within a relatively short period of time, "using home as a base for their first career steps." The shift *does* occur, but it often takes a period of years, not weeks or months.
2. The majority of emerging adults do marry and/or commit to a relationship. Most of them have children by age thirty-five. You might find it interesting that Americans are on pace with other countries, such as Canada and Germany, in this regard. Worldwide, Americans are neither the earliest to leave the parental nest nor are the latest. Women in the U.S., for example, are leaving home sooner than women in Italy, though later than women in Sweden.
3. Seventy-three percent of emerging adults report being satisfied with their current jobs. The majority of individuals in their late twenties report that they have found work they want to do for the "long run."

These statistics are both sobering *and* encouraging. The bottom line is that you probably should expect a period of “waiting,” a Launching Pad period that will likely be longer than yours was. That means you may need to recalibrate your timelines for your emerging adult(s). At the same time, you can have faith that they *will* move on and assume the roles and responsibilities of adulthood when the time is right, developmentally speaking. Knowing this, perhaps you will find it easier to manage the difficult process of waiting, standing by, letting be and letting go.

Standing By, Letting Be, and Letting Go

It’s hard not to be in control and to let them go their own way. You have to shift emotional gears. You need to shift from being in the role of protector and making things happen for them, to standing by. Who is good at it? I think the people who are less overly involved and less intrusive have a better perspective. I don’t know anyone who is sailing through it. All my friends are having issues.

Kim, mother of a 26-year-old
daughter

I think we don't give young people enough credit. They have been given the freedom to choose. If we give them that freedom to choose, we have to give them the opportunity to work it out.

Peter, father of a 25-year-old son

Wise parents of emerging adults almost always speak of the importance of standing by, letting *be*, and letting *go*. This is hard for many of us. We are socialized to be action-oriented. Standing by and “letting it be” runs counter to everything we know. It suggests passivity, which is anathema to our can-do mode of being. We find it difficult to provide our emerging adults the space to simply *be*, to make choices that we may not make, and to stumble and fall along the way.

Janice, Dorothy, and Clara, all parents of emerging adults, speak of the difficulty of letting go of their old ways of being.

It is a process. They need to be their own people. In our case, we didn’t give them too much to rebel against. They were comfortable. My daughter is still trying to challenge me, but is also still seeking approval. She makes choices I would not naturally approve of, yet comes back for approval.

Janice

I can hear me contradicting myself. Fun Thing – that’s my son - drives me crazy with his decisions. Yet, on the other hand, I know it’s all right for him to make mistakes. I have to resolve these contradictory feelings or at least learn to live with them. I know it’s better for him to find autonomy, better for *him* to be in charge of who he is. Yet some of his views and activities drive me crazy. That is letting go. I need to let go of *my version* of him. That happens by finding meaning in our own life. Children can provide some of that meaning but.... Well, I’m not there yet.

Dorothy

My child is trying to work on his future. In the process, mistakes will be made. I need to remind myself that it's important to accept that he made a mistake and then move on in the relationship.

Clara

Only in an accepting and secure environment that allows emerging adults to be who they are (not who *we* want them to be) do our children become free to explore and define themselves. Letting go of our children is a profoundly difficult thing to do. The good news is that we get ample opportunities to master it. If we miss one opportunity, another will soon come along. And any opportunity we seize can be a new start.

Karen Coburn and Madge Treeger, authors of *Letting Go: A Parents' Guide to Understanding the College Years*, urge us to keep in mind that...

Young men and women ask for little more...than a steady and rooted home base to return to, just as they had many years ago when they hurried back from their adventures across the playground to find Mom and Dad sitting on the park bench where they left them. To provide this sanctuary and still stay out of the way is an artful balancing act.

Marie and Brit, both parents of emerging adults, speak about this issue of letting go in their own ways.

Letting go means allowing yourself to acknowledge how you feel, but to understand it in terms of *all* people involved. It's about realizing that everyone does things for a reason, and if you can put yourself in another's shoes, it's easier to not feel so victimized.

Marie

You learn to let go when you know that by *not* letting go, you are keeping them behind. There are age-appropriate behaviors, plus or minus two or three years. You let go when you *know* you're holding them back.

Brit

If we can learn to let our emerging adults *be* while they're still in our homes, then letting them *go* becomes a relatively easy step.

And there's a hidden benefit to all of this *allowing* that we may not realize: in giving space for our children to be, we also give *ourselves* space to be, and in the process become more self-accepting. When we stop holding ourselves accountable for everything that happens to our kids, our anxiety levels plunge and we can relax into the flow of life. We can start to *enjoy* parenthood more.

Finding Balance, the "Delicate Dance"

We stumble through it. A fallacy is that once they're launched, you don't worry about them. The truth is, you worry about them *more*, because you don't have any control over them. You just help them where they are willing to be helped and supported. And you use your instincts about pushing them when they need to be independent. Finding the line between support and helping.

Fran

Fran's words, above, suggest that becoming an adult is a gradual, incremental process. Understanding, good judgment, and most of all, *balance*, are crucial skills for parents to learn. Steven, father of a 32-year-old daughter, adds:

Emotionally, you never let go. You are always involved, connected, worried and concerned. It is just the degree that it occupies your level of consciousness. ...Let things flow naturally. Don't force interactions. Make contact but don't overdo it. Don't have lots of expectations, demands.

Debbie and Rona, below, speak of the difficulty in finding a balance between encouraging their children to "lead their own lives," while continuing to provide parental support.

Communication is huge. Learning how to do enough, how to stay close, and on the other hand, not doing too much. It is a balance. It is hard for parents. You want them to lead their own lives and not be accountable to you for everything. I think it's real important that parents continue to be parents, but: the balance - you have to be careful not to step over the lines, the boundaries. I think it's just knowing when to be involved, when to ask, when to tell, when not to tell. It's really hard. Unless it's the laundry of course. They still want you to be that person.

Debbie

I vacillate between doing too much and doing enough. I cannot find that happy medium of guiding them that feels mature and responsible, without babying them. ...Pushing them from behind, rather than pulling them by the hand. Pushing them to fly.

Rona

The very nature of balancing is that it is a constant and active process. It's not something we get right once and then walk away from. It's a zigging and zagging affair. We notice we're doing too much of *this*, so we try a little more of *that*. If we take a freeze-frame of any moment, things can appear to be unbalanced. But as long as we're constantly correcting and adjusting, in the long run we're probably keeping balance *enough*. And in the end, that may be *good* enough.

I Am Not My Adult Child: Co-Creating a "New" Relationship

In my conversations with parents about their emerging adult children, many of them stressed the importance of seeing the larger picture, of looking beyond one's own identification with one's kids. With a wider lens, one is able to acknowledge that talking about one's kids is not the same as talking about oneself, a point made clear by Caroline, a parent of two adult sons, 26 and 29 years old, and Janice, a mother of a 26-year-old daughter.

I did not take responsibility for their strengths as children. I do not take responsibility for their shortcomings as adults.

Caroline

They have a capacity to grow. They *are* growing. Whatever worries me now, it is reasonable to assume that they will mature in a way I don't see right now. The mantra is: it is them not me, it is their life. You have to let go of the idea that it is a reflection of you. You want to brag about your kid. They don't owe this to you. They are not here to enrich my life, embellish my life. They are not a statement of who I am. They are a statement of who they are.

Janice

Parents must guard against confusing their own issues with those of their children and using their adult kids to meet their own unresolved needs:

On the one hand, [our grown children] need our care, guidance, forbearance, and appreciation. ...However, we can overdo our intimacy with them, confusing our issues with theirs, and we can undermine our own integrity by identification with and dependency on their meeting our needs...”

We are not our kids. Plain and simple. Learning to strip *ourselves* from the identity of our children takes tough, conscious effort for many parents. But it is well worth the work. Only then are we able to co-create a “clean” new, adult relationship with our grown child. When we “dis-identify” with our kids, we stop taking what they do so personally. We stop seeing their decisions as reflections or comments on us. With that comes a new respect, a new freedom and a new level of adult communication. Old rules of engagement become less entrenched, leaving space for new boundaries and roles.

Many parents never take the conscious step of dis-identifying with their children and, as a result, their relationships never mature into rich and mutually satisfying ones.

Solicited Advice

As we end this chapter, here are a few more choice words of wisdom shared by parents I interviewed.

You can't tell them what to do. You have to watch them make what *you* think are mistakes. Don't give feedback unless asked. Create a space for your kids to create their own life, not being over-involved and not being under-involved.

Kate

Be careful what you say about finding deep personal satisfaction. Because that is a concern of your fifties, and you have the luxury of thinking about it because you have already been working for 30 years. I have been bitten on the fanny because I have had my children say, "Mom you've made choices that limited your earning potential in order to be personally happy and satisfied. I want to do that too." But it's too early for them. They are in search of balance before they are *entitled* to balance. Young people are supposed to be out busting their fannies.

Caroline

The one thing I wish I could do all over again is help them from a very young age to make independent, age-appropriate decisions. As a mother I always wanted to make things better, to fix things, even if it was a minor dilemma. ...I am getting better. I now say you will figure it out, but it is an effort.

Terry

What we, in our family, have found useful is to ask them to seek the advice of at least one adult that they view as having good judgment. We need to all agree that this adult has good judgment. It diffuses the tension. And it usually leads to good outcomes...

Barbara

I found that it was helpful to involve another party when things got very intense. Like a three-legged stool. You need a third leg for balance and perspective. It helps with the intensity of the conflict.

Perry

Ultimately it is their life. They will do what they want to do. Don't impose your ideas. Have open communication. Your child may still listen to you. It's important not to impose your will.

Ralph

You've got to let them be their own people, from the time they are little. If they make mistakes, you have to let that happen, knowing you can't run interference for them. You have to be in a supportive role. You're not always going to approve of all their choices and that's okay because you are not living their life. They are living their lives for better or for worse.

Max

You've got to let them make some mistakes. And then you can't say I told you so. You have to stand back and more-or-less help them understand what they can learn from those mistakes. Guide them through it. You can only say so much and then they have to be responsible for making their decisions.

Beth

Try not to be reactive to what your kids are doing. Respect the difference, that your child is not you.

Susan

Parenting an emerging adult is a job that can produce a lot of inner turbulence. It often involves holding contradictory feelings toward our emerging adult children. The main challenge, I believe, is to *actively express the loving aspects* of the relationship, while simultaneously working with the negative feelings. It may sound simplistic, but *let the positive aspects dominate*. It is very easy to let a few shortcomings that we see in our children – such as lack of career direction or financial immaturity - begin to define the entire relationship in a negative way. Communication then devolves into constant criticism, nagging, sniping and defensiveness. If we always let our positive perceptions of our kid take priority, however, the relationship has room to grow and blossom and the negatives can iron themselves out.

In sum, parents of emerging adults are exploring *terra incognita*. It's not that there are no rules; it's that the rules are obsolete. They no longer fit today's realities. For reasons we've discussed (and for others that we *will* discuss), it's just not as easy for emerging adults today to jump into the river of adulthood as it was for previous generations. That means parents are likely to remain active parents for longer than ever before. And most of us are pretty clueless about how to make it work.

Anxiety is inevitable given the lack of guidance and certainty. However, we can lessen that anxiety to a large degree when we realize that the vast majority of emerging adults *will* commit to another, have careers and start their own households. They *will* launch. The best thing we can do to "hurry" the process is probably *not* to hurry it. If we can learn to let go of expectations and let our grown kids be who they are (not who we want them to be), they're likely to get to a place of adult readiness faster than if we constantly badger them and send them messages of disapproval, moral judgment and resentment. No one grows in acidic soil like that.

Try to put yourself in your kid's shoes. What would you do if you were an emerging adult in today's economic and social climate? Would you really have the answers all worked out?

I'll leave you with a poignant passage by Judith Viorst, author of *Necessary Losses*.

... although the world is perilous and the lives of children are dangerous to their parents, they still must leave, we still must let them go. Hoping that we have equipped them for their journey. Hoping that they will wear their

boots in the snow. Hoping that when they fall down, they can get up again. Hoping.