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Becoming Friends with Your Adult Children

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By [The Silver&Fit® Blog Team](#) on March 25, 2024



The phases of our children’s lives can be fraught, but there is a special tipping point when our adult children look to us as more than just parents. We become equals—and friends.

Every year, around the same time, my family takes a ski vacation to a different destination. We typically tack on people—close friends or significant others of our 3 adult children. And then the 9 or 10 of us share a vacation home. We split the cost of food, transportation, and other essentials. That’s because the kids are now adults and have jobs and lives of their own—we can all afford to do this.

We have a blast. We go out skiing every day, take a day off on the weekend when the slopes get jammed, go out for dinner, and generally find an adventure along the road (last year that was an 8-hour journey to a hot spring). We even created a tradition: Each evening at the

dinner table, we play “Rose, Thorn, Bud” in which we talk about the high point of the day, the low point, and our hope for the following day.

The great thing about having adult children is how much fun you can have with them. True, this is vacation and special time, but the role of the parent is the same. At this point in their lives, you adopt a hands-off attitude. You think of yourself as a trusted adviser who is respectful of your adult child and in their ability to navigate life.

Becoming friends is a perk born out of the fact that adult children want to stay close to their parents, and both parties are optimistic for what lies ahead.



How do I get there from here?

Not long ago, you were probably shepherding your own child through their terrible 2s or on an endless soccer rotation that lasted through high school. The next thing you know, you’re going through a fraught period with your teenager—and then, in the blink of an eye, you’re waving your child off to college wondering where the time went. The dynamics have changed, and another adjustment is needed as you enter this new phase of their emerging adulthood.

Sharon, who has 2 adult children, said of the transition, “Once my children became adults, my role changed. It’s no longer my place or responsibility to teach them or help them form their character and lifestyle. That role, while constant for 21 years, is over. I’m still always available to talk over concerns. Only if asked, I will give my opinion.”

Learn more about navigating the tricky waters of shifting parent-child relationships in the bestselling book, “[How to Really Love Your Adult Child: Building a Healthy Relationship in a Changing World.](#)”

Stephanie, an adult child, said, “I’d say the day I became an adult was the day I moved out of my parents’ house. I remember still feeling so young, but being on my own gave me this new sense of responsibility and identity that I didn’t have when I lived under my parents’ roof.”



Emerging adults, deepening relationships

According to a study conducted by North Dakota State University, “...the parent-child relationship becomes more reciprocal, with parents and children [providing mutual support to one another.](#)” This can mean that adult children will offer to help with something as simple as household tasks, or parents and children will confide in each other. The study authors also noted, “Being able to accept each other’s faults and strengths can be key to maintaining a high-quality parent-child bond through midlife and late life.”

In the book, “Getting to 30: A Parent’s Guide to the 20-Something Years,” the authors say that the boundaries are shifting. “Sons and daughters are morphing into people their parents would like as friends.” Their research also states, “By their 20s most of today’s grown kids consider themselves as allies of their parents, not combatants.” One reason for this shift is the kid-centric life of today’s parents.

According to the authors, these factors and trends help parents and adult children strike a balance and settle into “the comfort zone between closeness and separation.”

What happens when parents and children can't reconcile their differences?



Transitions

Not all adult children and parents' transitions go smoothly. But if you find that there are difficulties, keep the following steps in mind as you form a positive and nurturing bond of friendship with your adult children:

1. **Respect boundaries.** Adult children may have a need for distance. It's appropriate for this stage of their lives and should not be taken as a personal affront. Build a privacy buffer that helps them establish their separate identity and helps them build confidence in making decisions and learning to figure it out on their own.
2. **Listen.** Your adult children don't need unwelcome advice or snooping questions. This could be difficult. You've had years of helping them with the smallest details of their life, with being over-involved. Now, rather than doling out advice, listen to what *they* have to say. What cues are they giving you? Keep in mind there may be times you *do* have to become involved. If they are endangering their lives, for example, step in. Get involved.

Sharon said, "When kids are small, it's easy for a parent to say 'No, don't touch the light socket.' Or 'No, don't run in the street.' It's tougher when they get older.

"My daughter plunged into some rough times in her teen years," Sharon continued.

“I asked her later what I could have done differently. My daughter said, ‘Really, nothing. But you were always there to listen to me. That’s what I needed.’

Sharon added, “Sometimes I wanted to ‘fix’ what couldn’t be fixed, but I tried to always stay open to listening to (not judging) my kids. Whatever regrets you have later will fade in importance if you can look back and know that you were always caring, always wanting to keep communication lines open.”

3. **Do what you love together.** This gives you the opportunity to forge a sense of unity and intimacy. Make dinner reservations, get out on the ski hill, or go for a hike. These are all intimacy-building activities, and the casual conversation can lead to special moments of closeness you may not have expected. Maybe you love to play board games or take in museums. No matter the activity, doing what you both love to do *together* is a time to strengthen your bond with your child.

Sharon said, “My family always enjoyed vacations when the kids were growing up. I feared the day might come when they wouldn’t want to travel with me anymore. Happily, the opposite happened.” Sharon’s daughter is now her official travel companion. They’ve toured France, Italy, and many other destinations.



4. **Learn how to disagree.** Kids’ communication skills are now more sharply honed. Throughout their 20s, their prefrontal cortex is maturing, allowing them to better decide between wrong and right. This can lead to talking things over with their parents, causing less disagreement. But if things do ever escalate, listen to them.

Don't interrupt. Instead, try to calm down the situation. Sleep on it to let things cool off. Or agree to disagree.

Twenty-something-year-old Stephanie said, "My advice would be to give your child the time and space to be an adult. Growing into an adult is something that can't be taught. And you have to give your child the space to figure out what that means for them."

5. **Bring significant others and friends into the circle.** Embrace the people your adult children love, whether they have a similar or completely different lifestyle. They may be digital nomads, environmentalists, or covered in body art. By accepting your adult child's choice, you earn their esteem. The adult child now has someone else to shift their primary attachment to. After all, our job as parents is to put ourselves out of a job.

On our family trips, and in our routine lives, we make it a point to include the kids' significant others and try to make the connection special. There's no question as to their inclusion in all of our adventures.

Sharon says, "What brings me the greatest joy as a mom is when my grown-up kids thrive in their relationships, their marriage, their careers, their interests. Now, both my kids are raising their own children to be enthusiastic, creative, thoughtful, kind, and fun humans. I trust my grandchildren will thrive in adulthood one day, too."

On our ski trips, we too bathe in the joy that our children are settled in their current paths, thriving, working, carving out meaningful lives. And we relish the time to gather as a family, as parents and children—and as friends.



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