

# Honor thy father and mother

Relationships with adult children become increasingly important as parents age and become more dependent. In most families, adult children will at some point be called upon to participate in their parent's care. In a reversal of roles, adult children must act more like parents to their increasingly less capable parents.

The term sandwich generation is widely used to describe middle-age children who must care for their parents before their own children have become fully independent. What is less understood is the emotional baggage that many adult children carry from their childhood that affects their ability to care for their aging parents.

According to experts, virtually all of us have mixed feelings about our parents. We love them, but we also carry resentments from a time when our parents held all the power and we were forced to march to their drumbeat.

It is said that the prevailing characteristic of the parent-child relationship is one of ambivalence: of being pulled in psychologically opposite directions, both positive and negative, even vacillating between love and hate.

As parents know, the job of being a parent isn't easy. Parents must challenge, mold, and discipline their children in hopes of them becoming independent productive adults.

The job can be especially challenging during the teenage years as children reject parental guidance in order to assert their own identity. Ideally, parents can do their job without inflicting hurt or inducing shame.

However, with little training and unresolved issues of their own, parents make mistakes. As a result, parents and children alike can experience feelings of anger, resentment, and unfairness. Far from temporary, these negative images and resentments last a lifetime.

Unlike a Norman Rockwell image, most families more resemble

---

**Unlike a Norman Rockwell image, most families more resemble *Everybody Loves Raymond*, *All In The Family*, or *Fraiser*. We laugh at these shows because we recognize the tension, albeit exaggerated, between all that is good and all that is bad about our relationships with our parents and siblings.**

---



We laughed at the way the Bundy family parodied family life on *Married with Children*.

*Everybody Loves Raymond*, *All In The Family*, or *Fraiser*. We laugh at these shows because we recognize the tension, albeit exaggerated, between all that is good and all that is bad about our relationships with our parents and siblings.

Some believe that we can never be

---

**But for every well-attended elder there are elders without visitors. Were they really that bad? Are their kids that busy?**

---

totally adult. Instead, we are both an adult and a child just believe it or not like our parents. Being with our parents often resurrects feelings of our youth, both good and bad. Psychologically we have one foot

in the present and one is in the past.

For those with happy childhoods, the double experience may be a pleasant stereo of past and present. For those with a troubled early relationship, their past may color or even drown out the pleasant experiences of the present.

The illness of a parent later in life, especially if it involves loss of memory, can add further stress to the parent child relationship. How children react to their parents' needs depends on a number of factors, the most important of which is the level of ambivalence the child feels toward the parent.

The sex of the child and parent is another factor that impacts the quality of care. Studies show that daughters tend to be conflicted when caring for their mothers, and sons tend to be detached and distant when caring for fathers. Caring for a same sex parent seems to rekindle the competition and conflict between parent and child.

The most intimate care tends to be provided by daughters on behalf of their fathers. Fathers and daughters are less likely to have struggled for dominance, making daughters natural caretakers for fathers. Sons tend to be ill equipped caretakers as they have not been cast in a caretaker role either in their youth or as adults. It is not uncommon for a daughter-in-law, acting as proxy for a son, to care for her in-laws.

Memory diseases such as dementia and Alzheimer's add complexity and ambiguity to the relationship between parents and their adult children. Faced with a parent who may not even recognize them, chil-



**Mark Accettura**

dren often act as if their parent has already died: no more visits, no more conversation, and no more touching.

In the ultimate expression of ambivalence, children are torn between wanting their parents to live and wishing they would die. Alternatively, children may deny their parent's illness expecting them to act the way they always have.

Most adult children overcome whatever negative feelings they may harbor toward their parents and they do the right thing. Love, honor, and respect win out over past hurts. It's easy to identify these children; they are the ones visiting their parents virtually every day in the nursing home, combing their hair and listening to their confabulations about dancing with Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

But for every well-attended elder there are elders without visitors. Were they really that bad? Are their kids that busy? Perhaps, but these children are missing an opportunity to achieve closure with their parents; even if they are only a mere shadow of their old selves.

It is only when we forgive our parents that we can exorcise the demons of life-long ambivalence. We didn't choose our parents and they didn't choose theirs. To honor thy father and mother is to honor ourselves.

Contact attorney Mark Accettura at (248) 848-9409.