

# Setting Boundaries with Your Adult Children

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For privacy reasons, some names in *Setting Boundaries with Your Adult Children* have been changed.

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## SETTING BOUNDARIES WITH YOUR ADULT CHILDREN

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## “But I’m Only Trying to Help”

Let’s face it, not all adult children are dysfunctional, any more than all parents are enablers. Many adult children have been raised to have deep respect for their parents and themselves. For these children, the thought of taking advantage of anyone, let alone the parents who raised them, is abhorrent. Let’s call these children *functioning adult children*.

Generally speaking, functioning adult children were patterned from their youth to turn out that way, as opposed to having been patterned for dysfunctional adulthood by enabling parents. A perfect example of a functioning adult child is Dr. Dennis Hensley, author, speaker, and professor of English at Taylor University in Fort Wayne, Indiana. He recalls one memorable example of how his father helped pattern him for successful adulthood. When Dennis graduated from high school, his father gave him a clock. In an interview he told me,

It was a four-year clock that ran backward. My dad handed it to me and said, “For the next four years, your mother and I will keep a roof over your head, food in your stomach, clothes on your back, and help you through school. But when this clock runs out of time, so do you. You’re on your own after that.”

I knew my dad, and I knew he wasn't bluffing. I made it through my first four years of college living at home, but then I left and joined the service, completing my education on the GI Bill. It was the best thing my parents could have done.

Dr. Hensley's parents helped; they did not enable.

Another example comes from Ginger Kolbaba, editor of *Marriage Partnership* magazine and author of *Surprised by Remarriage*. She recalls, "My parents instilled within me a strong work ethic and a strong love for God. They helped me learn how to *think*—using common sense, etiquette, and an understanding of the Golden Rule. There was no sense of entitlement in my home."

Dennis and Ginger are examples of *functioning adult children*, raised by parents who did not enable them. Oh, they most likely weren't perfect kids growing up, but they followed a progression of growth and independence that took them out from under the dependent care of their parents. Today, they are responsible, contributing members of society.

Many of us parents in pain dream about seeing our adult children live as independent, functioning adults instead of the dependent, dysfunctional adult children they have become. And no doubt many enabling parents would argue that their adult children are incapable of taking care of themselves. That may be true. However, is this because of a real physical handicap or viable developmental disability, or have years of enabling crippled your adult child? And if your child is crippled, is this disability temporary or permanent? If temporary, what can you do to help reverse the disability and empower your adult child to take responsibility for himself?

The first step is for us to accept any part we may have played in making our adult children who—and what—they've become. We also need a better understanding of the difference between *helping* and *enabling*, and the wisdom and willingness to make the necessary changes *in our own lives* when at last we truly recognize the difference.

## What Is the Difference Between Helping and Enabling?

*Helping* is doing something for someone that he is not capable of doing himself.

*Enabling* is doing for someone what he could and should be doing for himself.

An enabler is a person who recognizes that a negative circumstance is occurring on a regular basis and yet continues to enable the person with the problem to persist in his detrimental behaviors. Simply, *enabling creates an atmosphere in which our adult children can comfortably continue their unacceptable behavior.*

Sadly, though, the line between acceptable and unacceptable behavior is blurred for many enabling parents. Not only are we often unaware of what it means to enable, but we’re equally fuzzy when it comes to what’s acceptable behavior and what isn’t. For instance, in the example I mentioned earlier, it *should* be unacceptable behavior for a child to ask to borrow 10 dollars and not return the change when given a 20-dollar bill. As you’ll remember, the mother told me this had happened repeatedly.

When we continue to allow these behaviors, we are setting up a pattern with our children that will be hard to change. We’re *enabling* their repeated inappropriate behavior. Then when we repeat the enabling pattern year after year—accepting what should be unacceptable behavior and instilling bad habits—it eventually becomes as natural to many of us as breathing. Yet all the while, a nagging feeling deep in our hearts and souls tells us something very wrong is happening. Take a moment now and look at the following sidebar. It will help you determine the extent to which you have or haven’t been enabling your dysfunctional child.

By the way, a word of caution is appropriate here. In clarifying the difference between helping and enabling, I’m not saying that we can never loan our kids cash or help them out. We simply must know the difference between a responsible adult child asking Mom or Dad to loan them a few bucks when an unexpected expense pops

## ARE YOU AN ENABLING PARENT?

Following are a few questions that might help you determine the difference between helping and enabling an adult child. It's interesting to note that these questions are not unlike those often asked in Al-Anon meetings when defining the behaviors of an alcoholic or drug addict with whom someone lives.

1. Have you repeatedly loaned your adult child money, which has seldom, if ever, been repaid?
2. Have you paid for education and/or job training in more than one field?
3. Have you finished a job or project that he failed to complete himself because it was easier than arguing with him?
4. Have you paid bills he was supposed to have paid himself?
5. Have you accepted part of the blame for his addictions or behavior?
6. Have you avoided talking about negative issues because you feared his response?
7. Have you bailed him out of jail or paid for his legal fees?
8. Have you given him "one more chance" and then another and another?
9. Have you ever returned home at lunchtime (or called) and found him still in bed sleeping?
10. Have you wondered how he gets money to buy cigarettes, video games, new clothes, and such but can't afford to pay his own bills?
11. Have you ever "called in sick" for your child, lying about his symptoms to his boss?
12. Have you threatened to throw him out but didn't?

13. Have you begun to feel that you've reached the end of your rope?
14. Have you begun to hate both your child and yourself for the state in which you live?
15. Have you begun to worry that the financial burden is more than you can bear?
16. Have you begun to feel that your marriage is in jeopardy because of this situation?
17. Have you noticed growing resentment in other family members because of your adult child?
18. Have you noticed that others are uncomfortable around you when this issue arises?
19. Have you noticed an increase in profanity, violence, and/or other unacceptable behavior from your adult child?
20. Have you noticed that things are missing from your home, including money, valuables, and other personal property?

If you answered yes to several of these questions, chances are that at some point in time, you have enabled your adult child to avoid his own responsibilities and to escape the consequences of his actions. Rather than helping him grow into a productive and responsible adult, you have made it easier for him to become even more dependent and irresponsible.

If you answered yes to most or all of these questions, you have not only been an enabler, but you have probably become a major contributor to the problem.

It's time to stop.

up and an adult child who *habitually* asks for money and seldom, if ever, repays it.

What I'm saying is that we need to be aware of when an adult child gets into a habit of asking for money and not repaying it, or when an adult child exhibits a sense of entitlement to his parents' money. Typically, a responsible adult child repays a loan, and the habitual borrower seldom, if ever, repays it.

The key to remember is, are we helping or enabling our adult children?

Make no mistake about it: If you have been an enabling parent, it may not be easy for you to change. Nor will any resulting changes in your adult child be easy for him to make. Learning to *choose* to do things differently isn't easy after a long-term pattern has been established.

Years ago I founded an outreach called God Allows U-Turns. A key part of that ministry is a series of true, short-story compilation books focused on ways faith can help us find new direction in life. The subtitle of that book series is *The Choices We Make Change the Story of Our Life*. Never is that statement more true than when deciding to change the choices we make in how we relate to our adult children who are creating pain in our lives. Equally true is that for adult children who have been consistently enabled throughout their lives, it's the choices they *don't* make that will eventually tell the story of their lives.

In her best-selling book *Raising Respectful Children in a Disrespectful World*, author Jill Rigby writes,

Respect was paramount when we were kids. But somehow over the years we substituted self-esteem for self-respect and lost our manners. Slowly, but surely, children became the center of the universe, spoiled, egotistical and disrespectful. I often refer to them as "aristobrats."

As a result of this emphasis on self-esteem, twenty-somethings are returning home rather than facing the world on their own. College kids are flunking out because they

don’t know how to manage their own schedules. Kids are growing up without problem-solving skills because many of their parents think love means solving all their problems for them. Many adolescents have no respect for authority because their parents didn’t command their respect. Instead, these parents gave too much and expected too little.<sup>1</sup>

Could this be true? Have we given too much and expected too little?

As long as we continue to keep enabling our adult children, they will continue to deny they have any problems, since most of their problems are being “solved” by those around him. Only when our adult children are forced to face the consequences of their own actions—their own *choices*—will it finally begin to sink in how deep their patterns of dependence and avoidance have become. And only then will we as parents be able to take the next step to real healing, forever ending our enabling habits and behaviors.

### **Assuming Responsibility for *Our* Choices**

Although it’s high time many of our adult children begin to accept the consequences of their choices, the plain truth is that *we must first accept the responsibility for our choices*—past choices, present choices, and future choices.

Our biggest problem isn’t our adult children’s inability to wake up when their alarm clocks ring, or their inability to keep a schedule, or their inability to hold down jobs or pay their bills. It’s not their drug use or alcohol addictions. It’s not the mess they’re making of their lives. The main problem is the part we’re playing in stepping in to soften the blow of the consequences that come from the choices they make.

*The main problem is us.*

Ouch.

It’s also the excuses we make to ourselves (and others) for our enabling. Excuses like these:

- “It’s just so *hard* for kids today.”
- “If I don’t help, who will?”
- “But I’m only trying to help.”
- “No one understands my Larry [or Sally].”
- “He [or she] just needs to find the right treatment program.”

Excuses like these keep us in pain—and further from any real resolution for our children or us. What must stop are the ongoing (and often useless) discussions we continue to have with our adult children, who clearly know how to push our buttons, how to control us and thus control the outcome, be it consciously or subconsciously.

The excuses must end. And as difficult as it may be to hear, we may be somewhat responsible for whatever part we’ve played—large or small—in the dysfunctions of our adult children. For some of us, the responsibility may be large. We have surely played a part—perhaps unwittingly—in raising disrespectful, irresponsible, ungrateful, selfish, self-centered, egotistical, and debilitatingly lazy adult children. We have played some part in raising excuse-ridden sluggards—“The sluggard craves and gets nothing, but the desires of the diligent are fully satisfied” (Proverbs 13:4).

Does this sound harsh? It was meant to. I know some of you may be saying, “Allison, please don’t make me feel even more guilty about my parenting choices. I feel bad enough already.”

I totally understand. However, if we really want things to change, it’s time to *stop* feeling guilty, take the spotlight off our adult children, and focus ownership of the issue on ourselves. The reality of what we’ve done and why we’ve done it may be ugly, but underneath it all is something beautiful: well-meant intentions. And it’s those well-meant intentions that cause us grief today.

For years some of us have focused our attention (and worries) on our adult children. We’ve not only taken on the role of director in the drama of their lives, but the roles of producer, stage manager, dresser, caterer, financier, and scriptwriter as well. We’ve done countless things

for them that they are more than capable of doing for themselves. No matter whether it’s a comedy, a tragedy, or a melodrama, it’s time for the curtain to come down on this act.

This show is over.

But a new production is on the horizon!

We must replace our enabling behavior with something else.

## Ending Enabling Behavior

From experience I’ve learned four life-saving truths about changing enabling behavior:

1. We can pray for the power to change ourselves.
2. We can help (not enable) adult children of any age develop wings to fly on their own.
3. We can find comfort in knowing we are not alone on this journey.
4. We can take back our lives!

In the book of James, we read, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance” (1:2-3). In place of “perseverance,” the New American Standard Version uses the word *endurance*. Either way we look at it, the lesson is clear: we are being instructed to hang in there, to stay the course, to *persevere* and *endure*.

What are we really made of? It’s been said, “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” I’ve always understood the second part of that quote to mean that when we’re faced with trials, we must proactively *do something*. We must *get going*, as in get up off the couch and make some positive changes. It seems others have interpreted this quote as justification to retreat, to run away from the trial, to *get going*—as in I’m outta here!

Many of our adult children have retreated from the trials and tribulations that not only test their faith but would also stretch them in

ways that would develop their character, prove their mettle, and give them a sense of achievement. Consequently, many adult children have no idea what they're truly capable of accomplishing. They've never really tried to move ahead with confidence and be all they can be.

Remember, God knows when to discontinue a trial because its purpose has been fulfilled. And He gives us two great promises concerning our trials: First, His comforting presence:

When you pass through the waters,  
 I will be with you;  
 and when you pass through the rivers,  
 they will not sweep over you.  
 When you walk through the fire,  
 you will not be burned;  
 the flames will not set you ablaze.  
 For I am the LORD, your God,  
 the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.  
 (Isaiah 43:2-3)

And second, the assurance that He won't permit more pressure than we can handle:

No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it (1 Corinthians 10:13).

The apostle Paul wrote from his experience:

We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed (2 Corinthians 4:7-9).

True, he wasn't a parent of a dysfunctional child, but these verses

apply to any Christian who is “hard pressed on every side” and “struck down.”

And we have certainly been struck down countless times, but like the Energizer Bunny, we keep getting up. Yet we’re so weary of living with the ongoing crisis that we return to the same behaviors and habits—and our adult children have us pegged. They know what to expect from us. They know that eventually we will “help” them yet again.

The bitter truth for many of us is that we haven’t been helping; we’ve been enabling.

So instead of praying to God to stop the pain, remove the difficulty, or change the lives of our adult children, we must rise up and pray for something entirely different. We must pray for the courage to look deep in our own hearts and souls. We must pray for the strength to begin a journey that quite possibly may change our own lives—and pray for the wisdom to make new choices.

Making new choices won’t always be easy. We’ve been repeating the same patterns for years, but now we need to ask ourselves what rewards we’re getting from enabling our adult children. What need is this fulfilling in our lives?

Quite simply, we must identify our own issues.

It took me years to get to the bottom of my own issues, but once I did, things began to change.

I was 16 years old when my son was born, living a nightmare, trying to stay alive. I had run away from home at the age of 15 to marry my prince charming, except he turned out to be anything but. The first year of my son’s life was like any number of Lifetime Movie of the Week scripts in which violently abusive husbands stalk their wives, making their lives a near hell on earth. One horror story after another had me looking over my shoulder for years as I tried to make sense of my world.

As a toddler, I had been brutally beaten and molested by a foster parent, which left me scarred in ways that would take me decades to sort out. I was an emotional mess before I met my first husband, then

after what he did to me, I was even worse. I was only 16 years old; I had no business being a mother. I was too young, too immature, and too unstable.

But, oh, how I loved my son.

You may argue that babies have been having babies for centuries. It wasn't unusual in many cultures for girls to leave their homes as young as age 13 to begin families. However, in most of these instances, the babies were raised in households where extended family resided. Thus, a young woman learned how to become a mother from older women who were far wiser and more experienced.

Not so today. Families are spread out all over the country, and young parents are thrown into the fray with very little preparation.

Plus, the young mothers of yore seldom had the severe emotional baggage young mothers carry today. In my case, I didn't just carry baggage; I had a truckload of dysfunctions.

T. Suzanne Eller is a speaker, parenting columnist, and author of *The Mom I Want to Be*. Responding to my questionnaire, she wrote,

Poor parenting skills are a contributing factor to the enabling epidemic. I often talk to parents whose intentions are positive, but their methods keep their adult children in a state of limbo. One parent complained that she felt her adult son would never leave home. "Why don't you tell him it's time to go?" I asked. She said that he was financially unable to support himself. This son had a nice vehicle, a Jet Ski, and trendy clothing, and he went out to eat or play often. Mom and Dad paid the mortgage, the food bills, and the utilities, and they didn't have the financial means to "play." It simply didn't make sense. This mom had no clue that they were not only teaching their adult son that others would care for him and his "needs" while he spent his money on "wants," but they were also setting him up for future relationship disasters. One day he will step into marriage, and the chances are, he will expect those he loves to continue the pattern.

It's time we break the pattern. It's time we find out what kind of

parents we are and do what it takes to become the parents our adult children need.

Self-awareness of the part we play in the enabling dynamic is a major success step. When we become aware of our heart issues, we are one step closer to being healthy. And it’s our own lives we must make healthy, not our adult children’s lives, no matter how much we want to help them.

How they live their lives, the choices they make or don’t make, and what they inevitably choose to do or not do with their future is up to them, not us. It’s amazingly empowering when we begin to define and clarify our own issues as parents.

Pointing the light at ourselves is the powerful first step to changing our lives, and God willing, our adult children’s lives as well.

Forgiving is good. Helping is good. Being there for our adult children is good. However, when living in constant need, crisis, or trouble becomes the rule and not the exception for our adult children, we must step back and take a look at our own lives. We must recognize our own problems with enabling and change our own patterns of behavior.

I know the idea that you may have contributed to your adult child’s poor choices is uncomfortable. Perhaps some of you really haven’t done much to bring about your adult child’s present crisis. You may not be a chronic enabler. But keep reading. There is much for you in these pages.

Whether or not you can identify enabling behavior in your treatment of your adult child, you will still need to set boundaries in your relationship with him or her. In either case, it’s no longer about your adult child; it’s about you.

I know because I’ve been there.

And deep in your heart, you know it too.