



NEWSLETTER

HOPE Newsletter - Issue 35

Stop Enabling Your Overly Dependent Adult Child

Learning how to sidestep guilt and be a positive influence for your adult child.

You see your son's phone number (for the line you are paying for) come up on your Caller ID. It is your day off from work and you planned to decompress. But it is, after all, *your* child, and you love him, so you accept the call. As you hear his voice, you have conflicting thoughts including, "What the heck is it now?" immediately followed by your guilt for being wary of, and anxious about, what your son is seeking.

Your son goes on a twenty-minute rant about how his former boss was a jerk and that he still can't find another job. He mentions that he has no money for his car payment. You start to explain that you have financial pressures too and he immediately says, "Fine, don't worry about me!" You then say, "Only this time" but you know your words have a hollow ring, since you've said this so many times before. So, with mixed emotions, you agree to go by his apartment later to "loan" him money to pay his rent. As usual, he promises to pay you back, but you know that will never happen. You think about how this chaos is unsustainable (your son is only twenty nine years old) and wonder when he will ever learn to stand on his own two feet.

Do You Enable?

Enabling, is fixing problems for others and doing so in a way that interferes with growth and responsibility. Do you create an enabling dynamic for your adult child? If he, for example, buys a new audio system for his car instead of paying rent this would result in a consequence of losing an apartment. An enabler rushes in and removes the consequence, giving the adult child no reason or opportunity to learn a valuable lesson.

Helping Your Adult Child Without Enabling

Does helping your adult child tend to become a pattern of unhealthy rescuing? If you try to "save" your adult child every time he or she is in trouble, you may be making things worse in the long run. Do you struggle with knowing where to draw that fine (or not so fine) line between letting him learn how to stand on his own two feet and bailing him out? Parents, for sure, need to be thoughtful about how to assist their adult children without enabling them.

Adult children who remain overly dependent on their parents often are allowed to get into this situation because their parents enable them, as discussed above. Perhaps this relationship dynamic stems from parents who want to be needed. Setting boundaries with your adult child can sometimes be the best thing to do, even when it is hard to say, “I am here to listen and here’s what I can offer, but I also think you will feel better about yourself if you figure this out on your own.”

Whether you’ve got a 35 year old daughter who keeps asking for money while falsely claiming she will pay you back, or a 25 year old son who just can’t keep a job, adult children who behave immaturely can be stressful. I have seen many sad stories in my office of families with children over age 21 (in one case age 44!) who still are overly dependent on their parents. It can be very challenging for parents to set limits with adult children whom have become overly dependent. The parents often feel drained and emotionally depleted. They want their child to be happy on his own, yet they live in fear of not doing enough to help their child get there. This is by no means an easy situation!

In some cases these adult children may have significant mental health issues, including addictions, which need to be addressed. At the same time, mental health treatment does not have to be mutually exclusive from the adult child contributing to their recovery in any way they can. Too many times, however, I see parents overly rescuing their children from their problems. While it may feel good for parents to do this, the implicit (or even explicit) message to the child is, “You’re not competent to make it on your own.” Parents in this situation can help themselves to be mindful of enabling their child by being carefully considering the following questions:

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- Does your child now act entitled to, and demand, things you once enjoyed giving—car privileges, gifts, perks at home, or rent money?
- Does it feel like you are living from crisis to crisis with your adult child?
- Do you sacrifice too much to meet your adult child’s needs?
- Are you afraid of hurting your child?
- Are you feeling burdened, used, resentful, or burnt out?

Encouraging Them To Live In Their Own Skin—Skin That’s Also in The Game

As children either graduate or quit school, they need to increasingly have “skin in the game” and strive toward being self-sufficient. This does not mean parents should abruptly put their adult child on the street. At the same time, the adult child needs to “own” his or her [goals](#) and plans to become self-reliant.

Sometimes, crises occur that send children back home such as a bad breakup, problems at college, or health issues. This is acceptable as long as there is a plan in place for the adult child to become independent.

Try not to be adversarial as you encourage your child to become more independent. The goal is to be supportive and understanding with a collaborative mindset. Be calm, firm, and non-controlling in your demeanor as you express these guiding expectations below to motivate your adult child toward healthy independence:

1. Encourage working children to contribute part of their pay for room and board.
2. Don't indiscriminately give money. Providing spending money should be contingent on children's efforts toward independence.

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3. Develop a response that you can offer in the event that you are caught off guard. Agree that you won't give an answer for certain time period whether it be the next morning or at least for 24 hours. For example, the next time you get an urgent call that says, "I need money," respond by saying, "I'll have to talk it over with your father (or, if you are single, "I'll have to think it over") and we'll get back to you tomorrow." This will allow you time to consider it and give you a chance to think and talk about it beforehand. It will also show that you are remaining steady in your course while presenting a united front.

4. Agree on a time limit on how long children can remain at home.

5. If you can afford it, offer to help pay starting costs of rent on an apartment.

6. Make an agreement for decreasing contributions to rent until the child is fully responsible.

7. Remember that you always have the right to say, "I changed my mind" about a previous promise.

8. Set limits on how much time you spend helping your child resolve crises. Encourage the child to problem-solve by asking, "What are your ideas?"

9. Remember you are not in a popularity contest. Be prepared for your child to reject you. He or she will most likely come around later.

10. Attend support groups if your child has a substance abuse or emotional problem. Only give spending money to an adult child consistently involved in treatment.

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Psychology from the State University of New York at Albany and completed his post-doctoral internship at the University of Pennsylvania Counseling Center. He has appeared on the Today Show, Court TV as an expert advisor, CBS Eyewitness News Philadelphia, 10! Philadelphia—NBC, and public radio. Dr. Bernstein has authored four books, including the highly popular 10 Days to a Less Defiant Child (Perseus Books, 2006), 10 Days to a Less Distracted Child (Perseus Books 2007), and Why Can't You Read My Mind? You can follow Dr. Jeff on [Twitter](#).

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