

# 5 Principles for Parenting Problem Adult Children

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Remember when parents would dream of their children going off to college because it represented a sort of finale to the hard work of raising children? A chance to relax from the rigors of constant guiding and nurturing? Fact is: Fewer parents are having such a “mission accomplished” moment these days. According to the Pew Research Institute, the number of young adult children living at home has trended steadily upward in the last decade. Even those who go away to college are often returning to the nest after graduation, rather than establishing independence right away.

But what if parenting your adult child is even more difficult than that? What if your adult child is making a host of poor decisions and wrecking his or her life before your eyes? It’s no longer as

simple as imposing a consequence or taking away a privilege to encourage better behavior. How do you react when your adult child is a *problem child*?

The answers lie in the messy place between realism and high ideals. There's only so much you can do, but you've got to try. After all, they're your children! Consider these 5 principles for parenting problem adult children to find the right approach.

## 1. Establish a new set of rules.

Acknowledge that you recognize that your child is now an adult and that the relationship must be different for that reason. But here's the kicker: It changes in *both directions*. Just as you shouldn't expect to set the agenda for their lives and make decisions for them, they can't expect you to provide for them, absorb consequences of their poor planning or decision making, or otherwise shield them from the realities of adulthood. The mantra of parents of adult children should be: you deserve to be treated like an adult, and I deserve a break from parenting a child. {Tweet This}

## 2. Use discretion.

There's a difference between enabling bad choices and lending a helping hand. For instance, if your young adult child is struggling to find a good job, but is working hard at it every day, providing some financial help to bridge the gap is a loving, encouraging thing to do. But if your adult kid is out of work and not particularly motivated to fix that, or is out of work because he believes that he has the right to do nothing until the *perfect* job comes along, your help may be just prolonging the agony for everyone. A little discomfort is a motivator. Let your child do without some things he values until he wants those things enough to work for them. That tiny apartment, the relentless menu of canned soup and Ramen Noodles, the inability to indulge in the luxuries some of his peers enjoy—these things can be a blessing.

## 3. Stick to your core values.

Sometimes adult children make decisions that directly conflict with your family's religious or moral values. And while you can't force them to embrace your beliefs or live in accordance with them, you can—and should—remind them that straying outside of traditional values comes at a cost. Whether the issue is substance abuse, relationships and sex, or financial responsibility, doing whatever you want can come with real and lifelong consequences. It's all fun and games until someone loses a job or a life because of excessive drinking or drug use, or finds herself a single parent because of poor relationship choices, or can't get out from under a mountain of debt. You'll have to use wisdom to know the right time and place to express your concerns, but silence is not golden in these cases.

#### 4. Don't nag.

Preaching to your adult child every time you see him won't do a thing to strengthen your relationship. In fact, it will probably lead to him avoiding you. Just say what you mean and mean what you say. If you see your child poised to make a terrible financial decision (like purchasing a luxury car you know he can't afford), say simply and succinctly that you think it's a poor choice — and that you won't be available to clean it up for him later. *Then don't.* No matter how much it kills you to watch him have to sell the car they love, or lose it to a creditor, keep your hands in your pockets and your mouth shut. Fewer words and more meaningful action can communicate the message without drowning the relationship in a sea of verbal conflict.

#### 5. Remember your grandchildren.

Many parents of problem adult children say it's one thing to play the tough love card with your child when it only affects her, but it's infinitely more complicated when a grandchild comes into the picture. We'd like to tell you there are simple answers here, but there aren't. It all depends on your child and the circumstances. Pray hard about how you can positively influence the situation without further enabling your child's bad habits. It might look like offering help that can only benefit the grandchild without entrusting money or resources to your child for her to squander. It might look like intervening to make sure your grandchild has exposure to church or other positive influences to counter some of the negative influences around him. Helping in these situations requires a tender heart and a solid backbone. Pray for wisdom to handling it well.