

The Sandwich Generation: Role Changes in Caring For Aging Parents

For many of us "Baby Boomers," finding ourselves part of the "Sandwich Generation" of raising children and providing care for aging parents, is becoming a common occurrence. While this may offer the opportunity to "give back" to those who raised us, it also poses unique and sometimes stressful problems. With our children, there is a certain amount of control as the role of parent assumes physical, financial and emotional power over children. While my child may not want to go to a doctor, as a parent, I can get her or him to comply with my wishes because I am the parent. If I want my father or mother to see a doctor, as the adult child, I can ask, beg or insist, but my power to make it happen is limited. Emotionally, it is difficult to "force" a parent to comply with our wishes by virtue of a lifetime of being in the child role. With more than 22.4 million households providing care for someone age 50 or older, the "Sandwich Generation" is struggling to care for longer living and, more often, ill parents. With parents living longer than ever before, adult children are faced with helping parents handle physical and mental illnesses.

As adult children, it is hard to take on the role of "making decisions" for our parents about their healthcare, finances, living situations or other issues. Becoming involved in our parent's finances, medical decisions and daily business may seem intrusive. This "role reversal" may be accompanied by some grief over the loss of that parent as an advisor or a mentor. Then, there may be several issues that are discovered that could have been avoided if only we had inquired sooner. Just as our parents looked after our best interests, we look after the best interest of our own children and must do the same for our parents as they age. This role reversal is awkward for the parent as well as the adult child. Here are some ideas that may help:

1. Discuss caregiving issues with parents before the need arises. These discussions can help guide decision making in the future.
2. Communicate with parents about their preferences, taking into account realistic circumstances.
3. Have your parent(s) strongly consider having a living will, Power of Attorney for Healthcare, and /or Power of Attorney for Finances.
4. Review wills and living wills including their philosophy of quality of life issues; discuss funeral arrangements.
5. Compile healthcare information. What medications are they taking? What is their family health history? What doctors do they see? What insurance plans do they have? Have this information readily accessible in case of emergency.
6. Where do they keep important information or papers?

No one likes to address these issues because it reminds us of the mortality of our parents. These can be useful steps in preserving dignity and respecting the wishes of our aging parents. For the Sandwich Generation and the Older Generation, communication and pre-planning can make this role easier for all involved. If as a Vanderbilt employee, you face this issue, the Work/Life Connections/Work/Life Connections/EAP may be a good place to start. For more information, call for an appointment at (615) 936-1327.