

Leave and Cleave, But Stay in Touch

In 2002 both of our children were married. They both “leaved and cleaved” within six months of each other—John in June and Jen in November. Wow! What an adjustment!

That got me thinking. How do you parent an adult child? What should that relationship look like? And how can we make sure it works well?

The Problem

Patsy, my wife, has said on many occasions, “Your parents let us get away from them.” In other words, they didn’t work at getting together with us, showing interest in our world, or letting us know what was going on in their lives. They rarely showed any interest in what I did. Even when I would share a detail they didn’t ask any follow up questions. They rarely talked to me about any matters of the heart—was all surface stuff. As a result, getting together was pretty much obligatory.

Their motives were not dark—they just didn’t think in those terms—but the result is the same: I have no sense that they took delight in me as their son. They may have, but I can’t conjure up any memory of it if they did. I don’t mean to be harsh—I really do love and admire them. They overcame a lot, and were a beautiful example in so many ways. My reason for mentioning all this is simple: I want to be a successful parent to my adult children, their mates, and a model grandparent to their children if God should so bless.

Until they married, we were vitally involved in the daily details of both our children. Basically, we were best friends. Now what? A lot of emphasis is put on “leaving and cleaving,” but relatively little is said about how to maintain the

parent-child relationship.

So, I thought about this topic of parenting adult children—what does it mean, and what does it look like? Here are some thoughts:

1. Keeping up with them. We want to keep up with their “daily” issues—what are my adult children struggling with that I could/should be praying for? What makes their hearts soar? Where do they need a victory? Where do they need consolation?

What a huge loss it would be to not connect at the “real” level of what is actually important to them. Isn’t it encouraging when someone asks you how the sore shoulder you mentioned two weeks ago is doing? An equally huge loss would be to not connect at the spiritual level of the heart.

2. Keeping them up with us. Let your children in on the “daily” issues you face—struggles, heartaches, joys, victories, big and little, good and bad. How I wish my parents had included me in their lives! Regrettably, I know they enjoyed golf and dinner with friends, but little else.

Your children really do want to know about your life! The best way to find the right boundaries for “how much” they want to know is to candidly, honestly discuss these issues with your children. I suspect my parents would have loved more contact, but if they did, I never knew it! Now they are both deceased.

3. Getting together. We want to make sure we get together. We have been discussing openly, “How often should we get together?” Looking back, I wish my parents would have taken that same initiative and said, “We want to make sure we see as much of you as we can, but we want to be sensitive to the many obligations you have in this phase of your lives.” Or something like that.

Be sensitive to the different levels of emotional energy people have. Sometimes short, but more frequent visits can be

a good solution. Don't forget to share holidays with the "other" parents.

Patsy has an awesome way of making our children feel welcome. For their first married Christmas they spent time with us. She wrote them in advance and asked, "What are your three favorite foods?" Then she made sure to be fully stocked up when they arrived.

4. Verbal communication. We want to communicate with our children. This raises the question, "How often should we talk on the phone?" I know this sounds simple, but growing up in my parents' family it was not. We never had a conversation about it. In my dad's later years, I talked to him every Tuesday morning and every day after mom died. But I hardly ever called my parents for 30 years—maybe 10 times. How did that happen? I don't know how, but I know that I don't want that to happen with my children!

When our son, John, left for college we blew it. During the first week, we called him every day. Finally, on Thursday, he said, "Mom and dad, I appreciate your calls but you need to stop calling me so often." We talked about it, made the adjustment, and things were cool from then on.

5. Written communications. I started writing a weekly email to each of our two children and their mates. In this email I (variously) share how I've been praying for them, ask for prayer requests and share some "details" about what's going on with us. Here's an actual example:

Jay and Jen...

Been praying for you every day—both your new classes, your new job, Jen, and your ability to juggle all your responsibilities, Jay, and especially for the evaluation process! Very exciting days!

Filled out app. for Ph.D—ordered transcripts—sent resume. NTC

started this a.m. Speaking on "Better Days—Restoring a Broken Marriage" tomorrow. Patsy, Marilyn and Nancy (in town for Sara's cheerleading championships at Disney) are right now over to see a house Randy and Marilyn want to buy—they have contract to sell their house. Ed and June will be in town this weekend for Sara—stay with us Sat and Sun night. I fly to Nashville on Monday for NRB (natl. religious broadcasters) announcing our new relationship with OnCore Group. Gave Jamie Hart copy of YMIM on Sunday—Monday he called for 5 copies to start group Tues a.m. Katie can't walk anymore without the miracle leash.

Talk to you soon. With all my love and "delight"— dad

6. Special occasions. Remember special occasions in ways that connect. There are many special occasions each year: Valentine's Day, Easter, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Christmas, New Year's Eve and Day, 4th of July, Labor Day, and Halloween (All Saints Day). These are opportunities for cards, calls and get togethers.

Instead of buying potentially unwanted presents at Christmas, Patsy asked our kids, "Would you rather have gift certificates or presents?" When they said, "Gift certificates would be great," she asked, "Which stores do you like?"

There are also special "once in a lifetime" occasions, like delivery dates, baptisms, confirmations, graduations, promotions, weddings, and funerals. These should be "must do" events. Presents and cards are a nice touch.

Of utmost importance are the birthdays and wedding anniversaries. Cards or letters are a must, and we try to give them a call.

7. Prayer. We want to pray for them, and have them pray for us. First, we pray for them every day and want those prayers to be specific as well as general. We want them to know that we pray. We want to know what is heavily on their

hearts—whether joy, sorrow, need, injury, hope, goal or whatever else is taking a lot of emotional energy.

And we want them to know the same about us. We want them to pray specifically for us too. That's a real relationship.

8. Roles. Our son, John, recently said, "Dad, you're my number one consigliere." No words have ever brought me more joy.

Our roles do change as our children go out on their own. Some of the roles that come to mind are mentor, counselor, encourager and babysitter.

But we also have to be careful. Perhaps the biggest concern is what one friend called "intrusion." After all, they are married and they do have their own lives together. That is the natural order of things. We have no business interfering in their relationship or giving unasked-for advice. On the other hand, we don't want to throw out the baby with the bathwater either.

One friend practices what he calls "the ministry of availability." We want our adult children to know that we are "available" if they need us.

They may "leave and cleave" but with God's help, we are not going to "let them get away from us."

Application: Which of these eight ideas is most applicable to your circumstances, and why?

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