



## What Older Parents Really Want from Their Adult Children

It is hard to be an adult child caring for an aging parent. It is equally hard to be an aging parent being cared for by an adult child. In this guide, you will hear from seniors who share what they wanted — and what they got — from their adult children.

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## Introduction

A lot has been written about caring for aging parents from the perspective of the adult child. There are books about how to care for aging parents and articles about how to cope with caregiver stress. There are tips for helping parents downsize their home and tricks for communicating with their doctor.

The better question is what do older parents really want from their adult children?

### Respect Your Elders

In a [study published in \*Research on Aging\*](#),<sup>1</sup> two professors from the State University of New York at Albany explore this question through focus groups of older adults. Among their findings:

“We found that help from children was in many ways resisted and certainly viewed as a mixed blessing. An overarching theme expressed by our participants was a desire to be independent coupled with a potentially conflicting desire for connection to children. In fact, independence was our most frequent code.”

### Be Their Partner

Parents want to take care of themselves, their own needs, and their own health and prefer not to view themselves as needing help. Yet, they also hope that their children’s help will be available if they need it.

So how do you find a balance between caring and controlling, between partnering and providing?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0164027504264677>

## Hear From Them

It is hard to be an adult child caring for an aging parent. It is equally hard to be an aging parent being cared for by an adult child. In this guide, you will:

- Learn more about what researchers have uncovered
- Hear from four seniors who share what they wanted — and what they got — from their adult children
- Read about strategies aging parents use to cope with their overbearing children
- Find out what important conversations you should be having with your parents
- Get advice from aging parents themselves







## Chapter 1: The Importance of Independence for Seniors

From the time you were born, independence has been instilled in you. Your parents taught you how to care for yourself. Perhaps you, too, have taught your own children the value of doing things for themselves. The desire to be independent does not diminish with age. If anything, it becomes more important.

### The Secret to Living Well

The importance of being independent is twofold for seniors. Independence is sometimes the only thing seniors may feel they can control as certain aspects of their life change with age. Additionally, maintaining independence promotes a sense of achievement and purpose that for many seniors [generates a great sense of self-worth and well-being.](#)<sup>2</sup>

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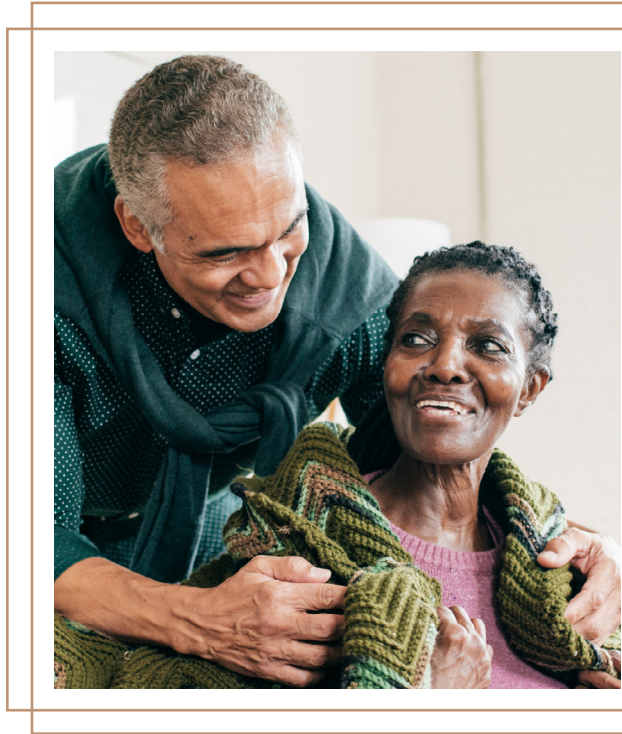
This is the secret to living. Dozens of studies have shown that seniors with a sense of purpose in life are less likely to develop Alzheimer’s disease, mild cognitive impairment, disabilities, heart attacks, or strokes, and are [more likely to live longer](#)<sup>3</sup> than people without this kind of underlying motivation.

## “I’m Not Ready!”

In focus groups hosted by the SUNY Albany researchers, participants typically described themselves as independent. When asked by researchers if anyone in their life makes it easier for them to take care of themselves, women responded with a chorus of denials: “No.” “Definitely not.” “I think all of us live alone.”

In a recent interview at [Highgate at Vancouver](#),<sup>4</sup> seniors echoed with their own assertions of independence. Wanda, a 78-year-old widow, says her “elderly” daughter recently toured senior living communities in the Seattle area for her brother-in-law. “She kids me: She says, ‘Mom, I found a place for you!’” Wanda says. “I’m thinking, ‘Oh, geez, thanks.’ I’m not ready!”

Marian, a 92-year-old widow, says her granddaughter had been trying for years to get her and her husband to move closer to them in Camas, Washington. At the time, Marian and her husband were in their upper 80s and living in Boulder City, Nevada. ““Why don’t you come up and be here with us?’ she kept asking,” Marian says. “Well, we loved the desert. It felt good.”



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3 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0164027504264677>

4 <https://www.highgateseniorliving.com/community/washington/vancouver/>

## Affection Over Duty

What the SUNY Albany researchers were most interested in was not whether the seniors were, in fact, independent. In the paper, titled “[The Bitter With the Sweet](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0164027504264677),<sup>5</sup>” what the researchers found most striking was “the centrality, emotion, and conviction that was clearly invested in a self-definition of independence for so many of our participants.”

Previous research also discovered that parents want to be helped without losing their independence and would prefer that their children’s attention be voluntary and based on affection rather than duty.

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5 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0164027504264677>







## Chapter 2: The Fine Line Between Caring and Controlling

Although seniors are fiercely protective of their autonomy, they do want help from their children when it is needed. The housework is getting tougher. There is more medication to manage. Day-to-day tasks are more laborious.

If you are realizing that your aging parents need a little more help around the home, they are probably realizing the same thing. You love them and want to support them, but there is a fine line to walk between offering help and suffocating them.

### Do Not Be a Helicopter Child

You have heard about [helicopter parents](https://www.parents.com/parenting/better-parenting/what-is-helicopter-parenting/)<sup>6</sup> — the generation of overprotective moms and dads who hovered like helicopters around their children. Well,

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.parents.com/parenting/better-parenting/what-is-helicopter-parenting/>



if you cannot stop worrying about your aging parents, you might be a [helicopter child](#)<sup>7</sup>.

One mom who participated in the SUNY Albany focus group said her children's anxiety sometimes prevents her from staying active and managing her daily life: "I live with one son who, frankly, is a pain in the teeth once in a while: 'Don't do that. You can't do that, I'll do it for you.' You know, I got to do something! I can't be immobile."

## **You Are Not the Parent**

Not only are phrases such as "parenting your parents" and, even worse, "You have become your parents, and they have become your children" not helpful. They are not true, either.

In a recent interview at Highgate at Vancouver, Luella shared that her sons are sometimes more interested in fixing her problems than listening to her talk about them: "If I call them with an issue, I say, 'I have this issue going on.' They say, 'OK, Mom, here's what you do.' I know what to do! I just want to talk about it. I want to commiserate a little bit."

Although your parents are getting older and they might need a little more help than they once did, they are still adults.

## **No More Quizzes**

Do you remember when your parents used to quiz you about what happened at school: What did you learn in math class? What did you have for lunch? It is likely that you were not too fond of their overprotection.

So do not be surprised if your parents are not appreciative of your line of questioning, either: What did you have for dinner? Did you take your medicine? Have you been grocery shopping?

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/whos-in-charge-here-aging-parents-resist-micromanaging-helicopter-children-1524489000>

Another mother interviewed by researchers said: “My children, they’re always around. As a matter of fact, I feel like I’m a child because I have to report to them. If they call and don’t get any answer, they’re coming to the house, so I have to let them know where I’m going, what time I’ll be back.”

### “He Does Not Mean Harm”

Fortunately, many parents say that the overprotectiveness that annoys them also makes them feel that their children care and are available. They appreciate the concern it expresses.

“I rather he left me alone, but he does not mean harm,” one woman told SUNY Albany researchers. “He is really very good. He means well. ... You almost smile about them being a pain.

You may be annoyed at the time, but afterward, you like it. You almost appreciate it. What would I do if he wasn’t there? What would I do if he did not care?”

Another participant, in response to another’s account of “pressure” from children who wanted to do so much for him, referred to it as “love stress.”

Ultimately, researchers concluded that [help from children was in many ways resisted](#)<sup>8</sup> and viewed as a mixed blessing.



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<sup>8</sup> <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/what-to-do-when-your-aging-parent-doesnt-want-your-help>



## Chapter 3: 6 Strategies Aging Parents Use to Cope with Their Adult Children

When Caroline and her husband, Clyde, retired, they moved to the Washington Coast. Clyde built his wife a house, and the two spent their golden years relaxing on the Long Beach Peninsula.

About a decade ago, Clyde's health started deteriorating, and Caroline became his caregiver. The last time he fell, Clyde did not return to the beach house after the hospital stay. Instead, he spent about three months at a [skilled nursing facility](#)<sup>9</sup>.

“When that time was up, my children said, ‘You and Dad can’t move back to the house. It’s not feasible for Dad,’” Caroline recalls. “Well, I knew that. I knew because of what I was going through. It was hard at first, but I understood, and so did my husband. He said, ‘If I fall again, something has to change.’ We were both in accordance with the children about moving.”

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<sup>9</sup> <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/assisted-living-facilities-vs-nursing-home-care-whats-the-difference>



The couples' response — accommodation — is one strategy researchers say aging parents employ to handle ambivalence in relations with their adult children.

Here is a closer look at six strategies aging parents use in their attempt to cope with the conflicting pressures toward both independence and support, which is only further complicated by inevitable changes in autonomy.

## 1. Minimizing Help They Receive

This desire to be independent can, in some cases, lead seniors to minimize the help they do receive from their adult children. For example, when SUNY Albany researchers asked a woman if her son does anything to make it easier for her to take her of herself, she responded, “Well, he tries ... this morning, he vacuumed for me.”

When the researchers asked if he does anything to help her with her arthritis, she responded: “No. I don't take care of my arthritis. I just take the pill when my back hurts, when I overwork. There's not anything he can do to help me with that.”

In the study, researchers hypothesized that the son vacuumed in an attempt to help his mother's arthritis, yet it was not interpreted in that way.

## 2. Withholding Information

Another way parents dealt with these ambivalent feelings is to withhold information from their children who would otherwise worry endlessly or try to prevent them from doing something that helps them maintain their independence.

For example, another mother who participated in the research study said her son calls her every



evening to check in and see what she has eaten for dinner: “Sometimes I lie to him. ‘Please,’ I said, ‘I had a great supper,’ but I had maybe only toast and tea.”

### **3. Seeking Others as Confidants**

Children can be helpful when it comes to emotional support, such as checking in with phone calls and showing concern, as well as instrumental assistance, including transportation and household chores.

However, they are not who parents always go to when they are looking for someone who understands their situation. For that, they go to their friends.

“I had a friend that’s about five to six years older than I am,” said one participant. “We talk to each other almost every day, and we commiserate about various things. ... Yeah, if something bothers me sometimes, I’m certainly not going to call my daughter.”

### **4. Rationalizing Busyness**

A frequent theme in discussions both at Highgate at Vancouver and in research focus groups was how busy their children are. Although a source of pride, this busyness was also a source of anxiety and complaints for many parents.

Marian moved to Vancouver to be closer to her granddaughter’s family, but “with the kids, she doesn’t have time for me,” she says. “She’s applying for a job with an attorney’s office. If she gets it, I’m going to be even more limited to seeing them on Saturdays. I see them probably about once a week.”

Yet parents — and grandparents — want to feel like they can count on their busy family. So they cope by rationalizing it.

One woman shared her attempt: “We have two daughters but living out of the state. I could call them, but I hope I never have to ... they have their

own busy lives. But they'd be here need be, but hopefully, we'll manage. ... Hopefully, we won't need it for a long time."

## **5. Ignoring or Resisting Children's Attempts to Control**

One way some parents cope with their adult children's overprotectiveness is to simply ignore it. When asked by researchers what one father would do if his kids ever told him what to do, he replied: "I would ignore it. I would be, 'Thank you,' and I do what I want to do."

Another respondent said, "I just have to roll my eyes and forget about it."

## **6. Confronting Their Children**

Although there are situations where there is conflict and confrontation, SUNY Albany researchers found the least evidence for this strategy.

Among their findings: "Overall, parents seem to avoid overt conflict, perhaps because it is too threatening ... perhaps because they are more reluctant to risk disrupting the relationship, due to having fewer resources at this stage in their lives."

Primarily, parents were reassured when they knew they had their children to rely on as a source of help in the future — but they did not want that help any sooner than it was absolutely necessary.

"Wait until I get older," one woman said, "then I'll need your help, but right now, I want to do it all myself."





## Chapter 4: 2 Important Questions Every Parent Wants Their Kids To Ask

Your parents might want you to wait as long as possible before you bring up their driving skills or moving to assisted living. That does not mean there are not other conversations you should be having.

Turns out what aging parents want from their adult children is to have been asked two simple questions: “What do you need?” and “What do you want?”

You do not need to jump to talking about funeral arrangements. Instead, start with some casual conversations to plant seeds. Then build on those to lead to bigger, more decision-focused conversations later.

*“I was thinking about what happened to Karen, and it made me realize ...”*

Use a story about an aging family member or friend to bring up the topic. Maybe you say something like: “Mom, I was thinking about what happened to



Karen, and it made me realize we never talk about these things. I do not want to pry, but it would give me peace of mind to know there is a plan if we need it.”

You can also broach the topic by relating it to something you read in the news. Perhaps you say: “I read about how much senior living can cost, and I was a little surprised. I always want you to have the best care available. Have you looked into long-term care insurance?”

*“I need your help with something.”*

Another way you can break the ice is by mentioning how much you admire the way they have handled retirement. Ask for advice on what has worked well for them so that you can learn from their stories.

You might begin by saying: “Dad, I need your help with something. I am preparing a checklist in the event something happens to me. Would you look this over and see if this makes sense to you?” You could also try something like: “Mom, I want someone designated to make my decisions for me in an emergency, so I am getting my paperwork together. You have done this, right? Could you help me?”

*“What is most important to you?”*

Understanding what matters to your parents can be a big help down the road, and asking them sooner rather than later could help them communicate with their doctor, attorney, real estate agent, family, and friends. Say something like: “I have noticed some things take more energy these days. What are the important things you really want to do?” or, “What are your

priorities? How can we make it easier for you to do those things?”

Be prepared to be a good listener. The first time you bring up aging and end-of-life wishes you may encounter tears, frustration, or even anger. Being supportive is key. Remember, it should be a conversation, not an ambush.

Often, parents are fearful of the loss of their autonomy. As much as you can, emphasize that you are their advocate and want to help what matters most to them so it is easier to make decisions when the time comes.







## Chapter 5: 8 Pieces of Advice for Adult Children from Aging Parents

It is hard to be an adult child caring for an aging parent. It is equally as hard to be an aging parent being cared for by an adult child.

Instead of thinking about your relationship as one in which you provide care for your mom and dad, think about your relationship with your parents as a partnership. How you can partner with your parents to make sure their wishes for end-of-life care are honored?

Here are eight pieces of advice for adult children from aging parents:

### 1. Ask Your Parent's Questions

It is important you know your parents' end-of-life preferences so that everyone is on the same page to avoid squabbles at the end. "My sons were very solicitous," Luella says. "They asked me about what I wanted as I was aging — and they listened to me."

## 2. Put Yourself in Their Shoes

Wanda's parents did not make any end-of-life plans, but she did not ask them to, either. When her father died, she became her mother's caregiver.

"She had no means to stay in her home, so I had to take her out of her home and bring her down here and care for her," Wanda recalls. "It hurt so bad to see her taken out of her home she'd worked so hard to have — because she grew up during the Depression. It's important that children try and listen and put themselves in that place instead of on the outside."

## 3. Let Your Parents Make Decisions

Aging is rife with decisions. The best way to make those decisions is to help your parents make them for themselves.

"I know a lot of people my age or older that because of the fact that they worked so hard to get where they're at they just don't want to give it up," Wanda says. "But they don't realize the toll it takes on their health. I think the children should be involved and listen to their parents and then help them make decisions."

"It was hard for me to tell my mother she had to go here and she had to do this and she had no say-so," she continues. "If we could have peace of mind to take some of that burden off our kids, to do it ourselves and make those decisions ourselves ..."



## 4. Have a Family Meeting

Before Wanda's husband, Dan, passed away, the couple figured out what they wanted and communicated it to their children at an informal [family meeting](#)<sup>10</sup>.

"When we got together with our families over the holidays, we kinda told them ahead of time what some of our plans were," she says. "They were thrilled because then they didn't have to step in and do it for us. That took a lot of pressure off of them."

## 5. Pick Up the Phone

The line between caring and controlling is a fine one. One thing that always made Luella feel loved by her sons was when they picked up the phone: "They call me and say, 'How are you doing, Mom?' Or if something is going on, they go, 'How did that go?' If there is something going on, they keep up with that. They're very caring."

## 6. Do Not Always Act Out of Obligation

Acting out of guilt can only drain you and ultimately make you a less effective helper. Instead of acting out of obligation, act from a place of love.

For example, Caroline loves it when her daughters stop by to play games. "My daughter Shirley comes on Mondays and Thursdays after she plays Mahjong, and we play Mahjong here," Caroline says. "My daughters are so nice together. They are so in tune with what I can do and plan things I can do with them."

## 7. Help them Understand the Why

If you find yourself in a crisis situation and your parents' situation needs to change quickly, Caroline says it really helps if you can help them understand why. She shares that when her husband was not able to return home after a

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<sup>10</sup> <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/why-hold-a-family-meeting-how-to-do-it-peacefully>



fall, their daughters found an assisted living community for them. Although the couple did not accompany their daughters on assisted living tours, they understood the situation they were in and they relied on their daughters for help.

For parents who might not fully understand, Caroline says it is up to the children to help them. “They have to know what’s going on,” she says. “Why do the kids feel that their parents have to be put into an assisted living?”

## 8. Get Everyone on the Same Page

Discussions around aging and long-term care can be emotional, especially if you have siblings. Fortunately, no matter how complex your [family dynamics](#)<sup>11</sup> may be, it is possible to establish consensus and get everyone on the same page. Not only is it possible, but it also makes things easier on the parents.

“It was hard for me and Clyde,” Caroline says. “We had been together for 70 years. To all of a sudden have our lives completely change — not that it was going to be the point where we’re not going to be together. Shirley made sure that we would have a place where we could be together. I appreciated that very much from the children. They were all together with that something had to change.”

## In Conclusion

Ultimately, your parents want independence, and they are worried about losing it. Talk to them sooner about what they might need in the future and what options they have. Let them know that you are on their side and will support them. Be realistic about the help they may need to keep and talk about their preferences. In the end, what older parents really want from their children is simply love and support.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/common-causes-of-family-tensions-and-disagreements>



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