

TIPS FOR HAVING A GOOD RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR ADULT CHILDREN

Step in when your child needs you and asks for help, but remember to step back if it appears your advice or assistance is not wanted. Be sensitive to them – though be aware that you may have to live with their occasional insensitivity to you

Your child holds their baby; you “hold” your child. Tell them how well they are coping, listen to their worries about parenthood and offer them breaks so they can have a rest.

Be interested in family newcomers. Particularly for mothers-in-law of daughters-in-law, it can be an enormously helpful and rewarding experience to get to know each other as independent women rather than just in your family roles. You are both women with an overlap of experience. If you can see her less as a rival and more as another woman, she may respond in kind.

Try not to over-dramatise: don’t believe that all other families are living in the glow of constant harmony – picture-perfect lives are for Instagram.

Grandmothers who learn to observe rather than try to lead appear to find more helpful solutions and embrace their new role in a more joyful way.

HALFPONT IMAGES / GETTY

The nest may be empty, but your babies are still your babies

Many older women struggle to find a place in the lives of their grown-up offspring. Louise Chunn looks at when to step up – and when to let go

You think you have your children sorted. You got them through GCSEs and A levels, off to university perhaps, or into employment, then – after they brought home a few bad ‘uns – settling with a partner and starting their own family. Along the way you might have had some advice from parenting experts such as Penelope Leach, the National Childbirth Trust, fellow mothers at the school gate, siblings or friends. You’ve earned your spurs: you can relax now, surely?

But being the mother of adult children turns out to be something very different from the butterfly-strewn fantasy in which your sons, daughters, their partners and children gather eagerly and regularly for family meals with you at which your every input is welcomed, your politics accepted, your friends respected, and your standing as a family elder is assured. Instead, many women hitting this stage of life are experiencing conflict.

Psychotherapist Annette Byford first unearthed the silent torments of mothers in their post-child-rearing years when she researched and wrote *A Wedding in the Family: Mothers Tell Their Stories of Joy, Conflict and Loss*. The book, published in 2019, dug below the tulle, bouquets and party favours of modern weddings to explore the complexities of family relationships. In the organisation of one of the last traditional transition rites in Western society, emotions can run high for months before the big day. Tensions show in each family, across generations, dividing parent from child and prospective in-law and every permutation in between. There are many beautiful and touching moments in these events, but weddings are also a powder keg of potential bad feeling.

Byford’s follow-up was published recently – *Once a Mother Always a Mother: On Life with*

Adult Children. It turns out you don’t need rituals; ordinary life offers plenty of ammunition to cause uncertainty, sensitivity and possible estrangement if mothers, 20 or 30 years after welcoming their dearly beloved offspring, turn out to be getting it all wrong and then getting it in the neck.

Speaking via Zoom from her home in Southampton, Byford tells me she had two motivations for writing this book. “One is my professional experience; my work with individual clients – I’ve always been really interested in family

‘She doesn’t do sharing of the grandchildren: one wrong move and there will be sanctions’

transitions that can expose cracks in people’s mental life – and then, on a personal level, I’ve just lived it for the last 10 years,” says German-born Byford, who has a son and daughter in their 30s. “I’ve experienced what it’s like to see your children grow up and leave. And I found this quite an interesting and challenging experience. So I asked myself, what’s going on there?”

As a mother of three, all over 21, with one toddler grandchild, I can see there are all sorts of issues: what is the right amount of contact with your children? At what point is helping seen as interference? How do you avoid hurt feelings? All of this while creating your new life, post-child-rearing.

While there are shelves of baby and toddler books, and a growing number on teens, late-stage mothering is a wasteland. That doesn’t mean women aren’t interested in it though. Byford found more than 30 women to interview, and many felt huge relief at being able to voice their opinions.

As Byford reminds me, women’s friendships are on the whole very much based on disclosing things to each other. “But there seems to be a taboo about talking about things that are difficult at this stage, as if it’s your fault. You’d rather give a positive version of your family life. It took a while for these women to say, ‘You know what? This is really difficult.’ And it is difficult for all of us.”

“With this book, I wanted to say to women: you’re not on your own.”

Where can it go wrong? Probably the most common conflict is over whether your children want to know what you think at all. Where once you were free to direct their lives, when they are grown, they make their own decisions. It can be very difficult to hold back when you think you may know better, but almost all of the mothers Byford spoke to recommend that you do.

“Mothers told me that they are constantly trying to balance what is on and not on for them to say. To some extent they live in fear of getting it wrong and for the relationship to break down because of something small they got wrong.” It could be an opinion, a criticism or a random comment that is seen as aggressive.

To complicate things, independence isn’t always what adult children crave. Sometimes they very much want the opposite: hugs, condolences, tissues and homemade brownies as they climb back under your wing because of heartbreak, domestic chaos or job worries.

The majority of the mothers told Byford how much they loved spending time with their grandchildren and many had a part-time childcare role in their children’s families’ lives. Byford herself looks after her daughter’s child one day a fortnight. Yet there are very often tensions over how grandmothers do it: what they allow to happen; what food is prepared; what activities are offered. As one interviewee, Paula, told Byford: “My daughter does not like me to be close to the grandchildren. She doesn’t do sharing: one wrong move and there will be sanctions.”

There is also the potential of jealous rivalry between the various sets of grandparents. Often the mothers of sons feel they have been sidelined by a dominant daughter-in-law’s family. Debora, for example told Byford: “She [the other grandmother] picks them up from school most days; we just visit a couple of times a year. We are the occasional visitors; we don’t really stand a chance.”

I ask Byford, who is in her early 70s, if she thinks this younger generation is different, but she feels that this difficult transition has long been there and in fact could well have been faced by her own mother, who had very definite ambitions for her daughter and clearly expressed disappointment at times. Just as adult children are transitioning into adults and parents, so older women are transitioning out of active mothering into the latter stage of their lives. They may be struggling with the clichéd negative attitudes towards post-menopausal women; they may be leaving work without wanting to retire; they may not have anticipated the next phase of their lives being different, so any sense of rejection by their children may feel particularly hurtful.

Agony aunt columns and the discussion pages on online forum Gransnet (part of the Mumsnet family) show the vulnerability of women who are not handling this new phase of motherhood well. Desperate not to lose contact with their children and grandchildren, they ask their peers for support and advice

on how to get past being barely seen at all by their sons, blanked by daughter-in-laws, distrusted with grandchildren – or worse, blamed and dismissed without ever really knowing just what they have done wrong.

Some of the difficulties highlight subtle links between a mother’s own experience and that of her children. As a psychodynamic psychotherapist, Byford is attuned to spotting patterns, such as those of Carole, who feared that her daughter’s husband and his family would become closer to her than she could get. Byford wonders if Carole might be over-interpreting

▲ The trials of moving from motherhood to part-time babysitter can be challenging

events or even provoking them, as in her youth she had suffered with her own mother, who remarried and had two more children, leaving Carole to be sent, unhappily, to boarding school.

“So, now, when there are new rivals on the scene, in this case her daughter’s husband and his family, she can see that she may lose out. They’ can send you away and you will only be able to see the new happy family from afar; the outsider looking in,” says Byford.

Having a supportive relationship

with your adult children seems the obvious aim here, and as mothers move back from the centre of their children’s lives, feelings of loss can be filled by pleasing your own self. Your identity is no longer dependent on your role as a mother; your new role can show your children and grandchildren all the wonderful things that women can do as creative individuals, long past their active mothering years.

Louise Chunn is founder of *Welldoing.org*. Annette Byford’s *Once a Mother, Always a Mother: On Life with Adult Children* (Ortus Press) is out now

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► Therapist and author Annette Byford

