



## Letting Go Without Losing Touch

### Part I—Apology and Forgiveness

*To keep on good terms with adult children, continue to be warm and loving, but do as little as possible for them or to them, as much with them as you both enjoy, and respect them enough to be willing to leave them alone if this is what they want.*

--William Glasser, M.D.

Parenthood, does not end when your children become adults and move out on their own.—it simply brings new challenges. Even if we felt ill-equipped when we first entered the world of parenthood, we had Dr. Benjamin Spock and numerous other resources to which we could turn. But when the kids are grown and gone, the game plan changes, and the resources are fewer.

For most of us, there are two overarching tasks. First, we must deal with our children's criticisms or complaints about childhood and facilitate apology and forgiveness. Second, we must forge an adult-to-adult relationship with this young man or woman—the one we can still remember bringing home from the hospital, nursing, or bouncing on our knee. Neither of these tasks is easy.

In this issue, I would like to address the first task—forgiveness and healing. Next time, I will address the second—building an adult friendship with your children.

It is truly painful when an adult child one day accuses his parent(s) of being “dysfunctional” or “abusive” or otherwise suggests that childhood was not the idyllic, satisfying, experience that we assumed it had been (and wanted it to be). After all, we did the best we knew how, didn't we? So how do we respond to such revelations from our adult children in a manner that nurtures the relationship and helps us both to grow?

First, unless you want only a superficial relationship with your child, you cannot ignore his complaints. Your son or daughter's wounds may be genuine scars from hurts that you caused or failed to prevent, or they may result from things completely out of your control. Whether or not your child's recollection matches your own does not matter much. Your child's perception is his reality—at least for now—and must be addressed accordingly.

We all get wounded growing up—some more deeply than others. Despite our best intentions we all wound our children, some more than others. There were times our children needed us when we could not be there; there were unwise decisions we made as youthful parents; there were mistakes we made along the way; maybe we stayed in a bad marriage too long.

When I was growing up there was lots of dysfunction and few role models. Despite my desire to be the “perfect parent” and provide my children all that I did not have, I can think of a number of decisions that I

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would love to go back and undo—decisions that wounded my children.

When our children complain of such wounds, we need to *listen attentively* and really work to understand their story—life from their perspective—even if their story contrasts with our memories. *Then we need to apologize.*

If we can clearly identify some of the mistakes we made and/or our children's complaints make sense, we should own our shortcomings and not make excuses or brush them away. As an adult, one of the greatest gifts my mother has ever given me is such an apology—it changed our relationship profoundly. As a parent, giving such an apology has likewise contributed immeasurably to the relationship I enjoy with my two adult children.

At minimum, we need to express our appreciation for our child's reality and empathize with her feelings. We do not have to agree or even fully understand—just listen and accept the feelings as the child's reality without any judgment.

The following are some tools to consider:

- Abandon your guilt and forgive yourself. You cannot change the past, but you can consciously shape the future.
- Listen to your children. *Really* listen. Mirror their words and ask for more until what they say makes sense to you, even if you disagree with it.
- Build your life around yourself and your relationships, not your children. Centering your empty nest years on them is not healthful for either of you.

Be patient. It has taken a few decades to forge the first phase of your relationship with your children. It will take a little while to fully develop the second. I can tell you from experience, though—the rewards are priceless.

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