

Letting Go Without Losing Touch Part II—Mentoring and Friendship By Kenneth A. Sprang

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.

Two issues ago, I wrote about apology and forgiveness in parents' relationships with their adult children. Today I would like to look at the parallel task of building an adult friendship with our children.

Our challenge in developing such friendships is to build a deep and trusting friendship, while not becoming one of our children's buddies. Our child hopefully has a comfortable cadre of contemporaries with whom he can "hang out." But we are his only parents. If we simply become another pal, we deprive our children of the unique gifts we can share as parents.

As parents we can provide unwavering support, encouragement, and affirmation flavored with the wisdom of life experience. We can also provide a "port in the storm" if life's tempests overwhelm our children. That may simply be a friendly voice or a willing ear, or it might be a temporary stay with us. Consider the Dr. William Glasser's advice:

"Do as little as possible for them or to them." Don't give unsolicited advice. We need to avoid the temptation to intervene in our children's lives and to give them what to do. I know a parent of a 30 year old who has a strained relationship with her son. She insists it is her "duty" to give him advice. It is, of course, that constant advice which strains the relationship. Sadly, even when the advice might have merit, it now falls on deaf ears.

If we see a circumstance in which we think our knowledge and life experience might be helpful, consider asking questions such as "Have you thought about . . .?" Or ask permission to share your thoughts. If I want to make an observation or impart information to my son, I often ask whether he would mind if I did so. He has never rejected such an offer, for by *asking* him I allow him the control and autonomy of an adult, and he does not feel treated like a child.

If the child has a serious problem, e.g., financial difficulties, divorce, or serious illness, be supportive and lend a hand. But let the child find her own solution to the problem. Rescuing the child keeps her dependent and is tiring for parents.

"[Do] as much with them as you both enjoy." Spend time with your children socially when they are near by. If they are distant, visit regularly and stay in touch by phone.

Do fun things with them—travel, camping, sports activities, theater—whatever you both enjoy. Take off your parent hat and just savor the pleasure of the company of this young man or young woman. Laugh, play, and enjoy. It is joyfully freeing to be able to just *be* with our kids, and not have to always act as a parent.

"Respect them enough to be willing to leave them alone if this is what they want." Sometimes the hardest task of all is to leave the kids alone. We mean well. We want to help. But just as our friends leave us alone when we want, so too should we stand back from our children when that is what they want or need.

Believe in your children and their dreams. I have written before, I believe, about my paternal

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grandmother-- my favorite relative in all the world. She always had a big hug, a twinkle in her eye, and a kind word. I once asked one of my uncles whether she was as warm and extraordinary a mother as she was as a grandmother. "Yes," he answered. "What I remember is that she always believed in our dreams."

He was right. That was part of her magic. It has become my mantra with my own children—to always believe in them and to believe in their dreams. I remind Todd and Heidi that it is okay to take risks and strive to build their life's vision, knowing, among other things, that if they fall on their face (as we all do from time to time), there is always a port in the storm at home. *Carpe diem.*

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