

PRACTICE TOPICS

Ever Changing Relationships Between Children and Parents

by: Cherylann Ganci, LAMFT

Regardless of our chronological age, we are always – *always* – someone’s child. As you read this article, consider both the commandment “Honor thy father and thy mother” as well as this quote from author Katharine Harrison: “We’re taught to expect unconditional love from our parents, but I think it is more the gift our children give us. It is they who love us helplessly, no matter what or who we are.”



As children grow into adulthood, it is assumed that the relationship between parents and children reflects growing equality. Protective fences gradually lower and the terrain eventually becomes more level between them. When children are thrust into situations that require them to assume control from and for aging parents, power turns upside-down. An inverted power structure is not only unfamiliar, it is uncomfortable to both parties. From the children’s perspective, parents are frequently bigger than life. They are assumed to be *protectors*, not *protectees*. Parents for their part assume and act as if this role continues to be true; and they are not easily directed by their own children. Subsequently, old, familiar, and presumably ‘safe’ patterns may be invoked in the later relationship.

Scenario #1:

My client, 86 years old, adamantly refused to attend her own care conference: “My son is paying, so he can make the decisions.” I met her 53-year-old son just before the conference. He was articulate and charming in keeping with his reputation as a popular academic and professional. As the conference unfolded, I observed increasing changes in the pitch and volume of his voice and in his posture as he slouched in the chair pleading for someone to “just tell me what to do.”

Scenario #2:

For decades, my 76-year-old client had been the executive assistant to the head of a corporation while raising two

stepsons. She had companioned two husbands through their lingering illnesses and subsequent deaths. She was recovering in a care unit from the recent amputation of her leg. She and her middle aged stepsons took a fieldtrip to the family home to see “what could be done” to accommodate her new needs. As I sat with her afterwards, she wondered if they would “see the writing on the wall at last,” and move her to an assisted living facility near by.

It appeared that life-changing decisions for both elders would be made either by default or by someone else when time eventually dictated an outcome based on necessity. These situations occurred partly because participants lacked awareness and partly because participants lacked the confidence to speak; however, both situations were complicated by the unrecognized role of power in the elder parent/adult child relationship.

In the first scenario, the son was well aware that mom had abdicated her power, yet he was not prepared to assume it. In the second, the mom had silently abdicated her power to sons who were unaware that she had done so.

When children are fully fledged, grown, responsible, capable adults - often times parents in their own right - it is still difficult for them to see and speak truth to their parents. Because parents want to save face by not asking for help, and children want them to save face by not taking over, elder parents and adult children alike find it easier to take direction and advice from just about anyone else.

This stasis doesn’t work well, as the situations above illustrate. Abdication of power may *appear* to be a good way to preserve both the parent’s dignity as well as the relationship, but it does not address the problem at hand: *how do we best care for this person?* For a person, who is the child, to care for an aging person, who is the parent, the power structure in the parent-child relationship must change.

This change requires stepping out from the role assumptions of the old parent-child relationship – foreign as that may be – while maintaining the dignity of the persons in the relationship. The *taking* of this power by the child from the parent frequently requires borrowing the power of another adult, and therapy is an apt place for the borrowing to occur. Examining the dormant power structure between adult children and their parents may serve to bypass situations like those described above.

The client is not just a grown up, a parent, a spouse, a worker, but also someone’s child. And that someone is more than a square or a circle on the client’s genogram. As we

listen deeply to our clients – *regardless of their age* – we must consciously assess their relationships with living parents and stepparents. The ‘honoring’ that the commandment requires and the ‘unconditional love’ of which Katharine Harrison speaks, can be better supported by means of an updated power structure.

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A Workshop Reflection: Bill Madsen and Collaborative Therapy

by: Jamie Klemenhagen, MA LMFT

William Madsen, Ph.D. is the Training Coordinator at Family Institute of Cambridge. He has developed collaborative mental health clinics and home-based programs. He is known for his book Collaborative Therapy with Multi-Stressed Families



William Madsen led a workshop with Kenwood Therapy Center on November 6, 2009. He focused on sharing his innovative work with community agencies to provide an alternative approach to working with clients who have traditionally been seen as most difficult to work with due to multiple stressors in their lives.

Madsen focused on the use of treatment plans and ways of relating to clients. In his treatment plans he interweaves the client’s vision statement of what they want their lives to look like, that which sustains or supports this vision, and constraints that might be in the way, and develops a plan based on these factors. This is a different way of honoring an alternative story. From this position the therapist consults the client, asking detailed questions as an appreciation. Together they are focusing on what could be, rather than what is, and shouldn’t be, in the client’s life. This yields a commitment to a life outside of the problem. Working with a person in a cooperative way is more likely to make changes rather than directing someone and finding that the client is non-cooperative. Madsen emphasized that life isn’t about finding yourself, it is about creating yourself.

Asking people appreciative questions is a way to collaborate