



Solutions for Life

from **Solutions Counseling & EAP**
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Shifting to an Adult-Adult Relationship with your Children

Let me start this article by saying, “I got a letter, I got a letter!!” (I’m doing a little happy dance...)

Sally (not her actual name) wrote me a letter concerning her 19-year-old son. She briefly outlined the issues she is worried about – the all too common tales of ADHD diagnosed in childhood, lack of anger management, lack of impulse control, fights, substance abuse, etc. Here is my reply:

Dear Sally,

First of all, let me thank you for the letter you wrote. Of course, I’m happy to help anyone – that’s what I do, after all. However, I can only help people who want to be helped. I noticed that your son did not write to me – you did. That fact leads me to believe that you may be more interested in your son getting better than he is. In response to your letter, I would like to chat with you about your role in this situation.

It is very difficult to watch someone you’ve loved for so long struggle. I’ve seen so many families in pain watching their children flounder in the worlds of addiction, mental instability, and poor choices in general. We have such hope for them when they are beautiful babies, and that hope never goes away.

When they were children, we had much more of an opportunity to control things in their lives – where they went, who they were with, etc. As adults, there is very little we can do about their choices.

One of the things I’ve watched parents

struggle with is the shift from a Parent-Child relationship to an Adult-Adult relationship with their adult children.

I’m wondering if you’re having a difficult time with this too, Sally. Our job as parents of children is to protect them, keep them happy and healthy, and rescue them from danger. Our job as parents of adults is to love them and get out of the way. This means you don’t make the phone calls (or write emails) for your son to schedule appointments for him. This means you don’t hire the attorney when he gets himself into legal trouble. This means you don’t solve his problems for him.

Adult children no longer need us to protect or rescue them. In fact, it is imperative that we do not step in. Consequences for their choices are very often the only thing that serves as a wake-up call. Once adult children realize we will be there to get them out of the messes they get themselves in, where is the incentive to do the right thing?

It’s time to empower your son to think for himself and begin to solve his own problems. You do this by asking questions – “Gee, how are you going to handle this?” “What options have you thought of?” “What do you think might happen if you choose that particular option?”

Another area that I would ask you to think about is boundaries. Boundaries are the limits we set with others and ourselves. What are you willing to do, and where is the line you will not cross?

So often parents in your situation are too busy putting out the fires their children keep setting that they’ve never considered having a limit. Begin to consider your options in the various situations as they come up.

I’m a real big believer in “we teach people how to treat us.” A boundary for some parents might be that they will speak to their adult children as long as they are sober and handling themselves appropriately. Should the child attempt to communicate when they are under the influence, or belligerent and rude, the parent will remove him/herself from the situation. Another boundary might be that the next time your son finds himself in jail after a fight, you will not bail him out.

A word of caution – boundaries only work when they are kept. This is not the time for “talking tough” then giving in. That only teaches your adult child that you do not really mean what you say.

Sally, when your son truly becomes ready to address the areas of his life that are causing him trouble, he will find resources to help him. There are plenty of places locally that help with substance abuse, anger management, etc.

My encouragement to you at this point is to begin deciding how you want to handle yourself in this very frustrating situation. After all, the only thing in this great big world that you can control is yourself – your words, your actions, your beliefs. Good luck!