

Elder Care - More Than "Parenting a Parent"

A combination of trends is sparking heightened interest in generational issues. For one thing, people are simply living longer due to advances in medicine and preventive health. It's more common today, as opposed to 50 years ago, to see people live into their 90s and some who face financial difficulty may have to face moving back in with their children. The problem is compounded by the fact that a number of Baby Boomers have waited until well after age 30 to start their families. Many now bear the cost of caring for elderly parents, while simultaneously emptying their bank accounts to cover their children's college tuition.

Miscommunication

The whole family is affected by an aging relative's distress over such changes as declining health, a move to a nursing home, or moving in with their children.

The problem is that many people try to resolve these dilemmas without first talking about them to hear the needs of everyone involved. Thus, a family may feel obligated to bring Grandpa into the home after his heart attack, without first asking him if he would prefer assisted living or a retirement community instead.

Studies show that most older people prefer not to reside with their children, but would rather live independently. Families need to discuss candidly the potential problems of creating a multigenerational household, before bringing an elderly loved one into the home.

Avoiding a role reversal

Conflicts typically arise in multigenerational households because the adult children feel they must assume a parental role with their live-in mother or father. Adult children may become sources of emotional, financial and even physical support for their parents, but this is not the same as raising them. They should learn to regard their parents as individuals, not just people who reared them. They should also recognize that their parents are coping with declining faculties, the deaths of old friends and relatives, and other losses in their lives.

Thanks to Linda Teri, PhD, director of the geriatric and family services department at the University of Washington Medical Center in Seattle.

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