

When parents and older children see latter's future differently

Cutting family ties

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SOURCE: Stand Alone DESERET NEWS GRAPHIC

Life in Dick and Liz Diamond's home followed a pretty straightforward trajectory until recently. Their oldest, a daughter, went to college, then got married. The middle child, a son, went to college after completing a mission for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. They assumed their younger son, Alex, would do the same, wondering only which would come first, college or mission.

It turns out Alex, 19, had his own ideas about the path he'd follow as an adult. One night while he was still in high school, after mentally rehearsing it often because he really hates conflict, the youngest Diamond told his stunned parents he would not go on a church mission, that he isn't sure about God.

"You try to not be living through your children and you try to let them make their choices, but this was something that sort of blindsided us," said Liz Diamond, of Salt Lake City.

They are in good company.

It is not uncommon for older children, from teens through fully grown adults, to abandon at least portions of their parents' planned trajectory. Mothers and fathers snuggle their babies and picture how those babies' lives will unfold. But contrary to parental wishes, those offspring may grow into people who change faiths or

drop God. They may bypass marriage or live with partners who haven't won parental approval. They may drink, do drugs, drop out of school, have no babies or have them too soon.

Numbers are hard to come by, but based on surveys in Great Britain, Australia and the United States, it's believed about one-fifth of families have disagreements serious enough to result in estrangement, though not always parent-child. A survey of 2,082 adults by a Great Britain group called Stand Alone found 8 percent had cut off contact with a family member, while 19 percent said they or another family member had done so. Similar numbers were reported in Australia and it's believed that might be true in the United States, as well. In each case, an undercount was suspected.

The future of an older child-parent relationship often rests on how parents handle such conflict, experts say. It is, perhaps, the most tricky segment of the entire parent-child journey.

"Typically, older kids care somewhat about what you think, but they care more about what they think," said Joshua Coleman, a San Francisco psychologist and co-chairman of the Council on Contemporary Families. "If you pose them with an ultimatum that they can't have a close relationship with you unless they make their lives conform to what your ideals are at the expense of their own ideals, you're probably not going to have a relationship with them."

Child-focused life

Coleman, 60, starts a conversation about parent-child conflict with a brief history lesson. Families have only been egalitarian for about 50 years, children moving from "seen but not heard" to the "axis on which the family revolves," at least in the upper and middle class. Working-class folks more often emphasize behaviors like respect for elders, while leaving the children to experience childhood, he said.

That group is less apt to hover over children, a habit popularly referred to as "hothouse" or "helicopter" parenting. But even these parents are more childcentric than in the past, said Coleman, whose practice often centers on parent-child reconciliation. He works frequently with parents who want their estranged children back in their lives.

Many things create family rifts. Coleman sees children who resent a parent because of divorce or who perceive a parent as too controlling. Peer into many schisms and there's an in-law fomenting discord. Sometimes, a child raised in a very close home may cut off the parent because he or she can't see any other path to independence.

Dennis Poncher, a 76-year-old father of two, most often works with the parents in these schisms. His goal is to help them get what they want in a relationship, although conflict is at least partly their problem, he said.

His own family disruption led him to found the free parent-support network Because I Love You, BILY, 32 years ago. Not long after his wife died, his teen daughter became pregnant and his son was busted for drugs. He couldn't find much guidance or support. Eventually he built the network, based in California but active in many states and Canada.

"Parents come to BILY because they want us to fix their kid, no matter what age. We can't." The only way they will have a chance of fixing the situation is by recognizing "whatever you're doing isn't working," he tells parents.

Power to decide

Psychologist Coleman said the child usually has the power in the adult child-parent relationship. "Typically, once a kid becomes an adult, what keeps the child in that parent's orbit is whether or not the child wants a relationship," he said. The sense a child "owes you" may not mean much.

"Unequal Childhoods" author Annette Lareau said young adults from working-class families were more grateful for what their parents did for them than were those from upper- or middle-class families. The children in those more financially secure families largely lacked gratitude. Coleman thinks parents in working-class families might be more able to influence their children into adulthood because those children are more grateful.

Regardless, "a high percentage" of older children choose not to have a relationship with the parent if they feel judged or unaccepted, he said.

But parents have both voice and choice, too. Poncher told his son he'd support any choice the youth made once he turned 18. "This is what I mean by support. I will give you consequences for breaking rules when you live in my house. If you move out and you choose a negative lifestyle, I am OK with that as long as it doesn't affect my life."

"You have to make a decision about whether or not you want a long-term relationship with your child or whether you have to constantly tell them what you think and feel about their choices," said Coleman. "In most cases, you won't be able to do both."

Letting go

Dick Diamond, 54, struggles a little to balance being a dad with respecting his son's wishes.

"Letting go is probably one of the hardest areas for parents, giving ownership back to the child," said Poncher. "At some point you have to let the child make the decisions and you're not going to agree with every decision."

As children move into adolescence, parents need to start transitioning into consultant roles, he and Coleman agree.

"Once they're teens, you have to give them much more rope if you're really training them to become adults," said Coleman. "You want to have a relationship with your kids such that they will feel safe confiding in you, so you can actually help them in a consulting role."

Consulting would be letting children know the consequences of staying out past curfew and letting them make the choice.

That consulting role will evolve as the child becomes an adult and parents lose most of their leverage unless they're supporting their offspring or the older child still lives at home.

"The good news is that generally speaking, relationships hold, if parents can navigate their decreasing role of importance," said Coleman. "I think that's what so many parents struggle with — that diminished role."

Parents must be willing to let older children stumble, while hoping they won't. Poncher tells parents that even if they have real reasons to feel guilty about their parenting, it must be followed with the word "nevertheless...." So yes, a parent worked too many hours or didn't recognize a substance-abuse problem early or divorced the child's father. Nevertheless...

The word prepares both to move past the problem.

Hanging on

Poncher scaled the huge dreams he had for his children back to basics: good health and happiness.

"If my child is happy digging ditches, let him dig the ditches, because I'm not digging them and that's his decision. When he's not happy doing it and comes to me, I can give him some guidance, but it's still his decision," Poncher said. "When he chooses another religion, naturally I'm not going to be happy about it, but I have to learn to let it go. If they're happy — that means mentally and physically — let it go."

Coleman suggests parents have this discussion if they want a long-term relationship with their children: "We have strong feelings about that, but we love you and we will accept you no matter what you do, even though we don't agree with your decision. We don't share your values, but you are an adult and you get to decide."

"If your ideas are so strong that you would feel like a hypocrite staying close to your child, then I guess you stand on those ideas," Coleman said. "But you should know that you are going to drive your child away and you may actually damage that child with what's going to be experienced as a profound personal rejection."

Tina Sustaeta, 46, a teen and family counselor in Austin, Texas, said modern culture drives some of the decisions kids make and they have been largely desensitized to substances like marijuana, the use of alcohol and sex in

general. They make decisions their parents don't support. She recently counseled a pregnant teen who wants to keep the baby, while her mother believes she should give it up. The choice will belong to the new mom.

She, too, believes if parents get too upset, the child will disappear from their lives.

Dick Diamond is grateful his son is not addicted to drugs or alcohol, doesn't smoke, or isn't battling mental illness, because those are all tough to overcome in different ways. Their son is exercising his right to choose a religion; it makes them sad, but he still brings them joy. "The love doesn't change," said Dick Diamond.

Liz Diamond, 50, worried about nailing shut a door that Alex might one day be willing to reopen, if even just a crack. She moped at first.

One day, her son told her, "You know, I am not making these choices just to hurt you or spite you." Those words were balm. She realized he'd made a choice, not an emotional or hasty decision. He was doing it to be true to himself, not to get back at them for some real or imagined reason. It opened the door to better discussions.

"I never felt like I would not speak to him again or would kick him out," said Liz Diamond. "He is my son and I love him. He's not doing what I want him to do, but not because he doesn't love me."

Stepping in and out

Health and safety issues are different. Substance abuse or mental illness issues for a parent or child create long-term problems. Age plays a role — there's a big difference handling drinking by someone who's 13, compared with 16, compared with legal age.

That doesn't mean even the oldest children are allowed to do dangerous things, like drugs or binge drinking, while a parent remains silent or doesn't seek help. If a child is "healthy physically, but is mentally on his way to join ISIS, then you have to step up to the plate," Poncher said.

In some situations, a parent's support "becomes life and death," Coleman warned. Shaming behavior increases the risk lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender offspring will face suicide, depression or other psychological problems.

In most situations, Coleman said parents can express their views once or even twice about an adult child's choices. If they can't make peace with it, relationships will end. Some people feel so strongly that they'd rather sever ties with their child. He said parents should know that decision may damage a child, who will feel rejected. It can also hurt the parent.

Liz Diamond still wants Alex to get some of the other human benefits she believes religious service provides, including a broader worldview and some distance from home. So, Alex has been researching a service opportunity his parents will fund with money that was for his mission for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He's considering humanitarian service in Sri Lanka.

Dick Diamond said Alex has always been a "100 percenter," throwing himself wholeheartedly into endeavors. He was always the hardest worker, too.

"Here's the interesting thing," said Dick Diamond. "We have a wonderful relationship with him. He's the child who every night says he loves us and gives us a hug before he goes to bed. Our relationship is strong; he knows we love him unconditionally without having to say it. "

Email: lois@deseretnews.com, Twitter: Loisco

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