

The Role of Being a Parent in the Sandwich Generation

Nestled between raising kids and eventually caring for aging parents, a metro Detroit mom reflects on being a parent in the sandwich generation.

By **Lynne Golodner**
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Three weeks after college graduation, I packed up my Ford Probe and my dad accompanied me as I drove to New York City to start my new adult life.

I carted clothing, my stereo system and my tennis racquet and set up camp in my cousin's apartment until I got a paying job that allowed me to rent my own place.

Even then, I didn't go looking for a lease without guidance. From long distance, my dad directed a business colleague in New York to help me find the right neighborhood, at the right price.

I never had to figure out a new city alone.

At the time, I gave no thought to my parents' position. They were in their 40s or 50s, their parents still alive and well, though **aging**, and myself, my brother and my sister were eager to spread our wings but still very dependent on their information and approval.

Why would I consider the dual responsibility my parents faced – of being parents to grown children and children of aging parents?

The pull of family

Today, however, I understand their unique predicament, because it's where I am. Still, some part of me knew even then that a life far away from family posed its own set of complications.

I didn't stay away long. After a year in New York, a transfer to the Washington, D.C. bureau of my newspaper, and nearly three years in the nation's capital, I felt I was missing out on family connections.

My parents, my grandparents, my cousins were all in Michigan, so I packed up my material goods and drove the same car, with my dad alongside me once again, north of the Mason-Dixon line, leaving Washington for my Motor City hometown.

I was in my 20s and eager to be free and independent, but I recognized the importance of turning to trusted, loved older relatives to guide me on my journey.

Today, in my mid-40s, I remain a 15-minute drive from my parents, and it's as important to me today to be near family as it was in my earlier years.

Except, for different reasons.

As we age, we are independent and in need in different ways. With four children of my own, on the brink of their own adolescence, I still seek my parents' counsel because they offer the wisdom of more years than I've walked the planet. They've parented successfully.

They know things I don't. They have the benefit of time to gain perspective, so when **my teenage son and I** struggle, my dad can calm me down and offer guidance on how to navigate the conversation.

I trust their insights, and it helps make my journey a little bit easier.

On the flip side, I have the energy of midlife rather than advanced years, and sometimes that comes in handy and helpful for people decades ahead of me.

My **parents are, thankfully, independent and strong**, and they don't need much from me. But it helps both of us to know that I'm here, if a need arises.

Being in between

I am a parent in the **sandwich generation** – full on.

Some in the sandwich situation are caring for ill parents, **financing aging parents**, or otherwise helping in more ways than one. I'm lucky that I don't need to do either at this point because the four children I am raising – three teens and a tween at this moment – are involved in activities, sports and other pursuits that drain my savings for sure.

Plus, I'm trying to save for the seemingly insurmountable mountain that is college. My eldest is a year and a half away from **immersing in higher education**, with dreams of Ivy League institutions that ring in at \$70,000 a year. That's a tough pill to swallow.

This is the thick of things. It's busy. It's expensive. It's emotionally draining and emotionally rich simultaneously.

There are immense blessings about this stage of life. For instance, my teenage son and my father have developed an incredible bond. They talk on the phone most nights, and I learn about both from the other sometimes.

That affirms my decision two decades ago to come home and be close to the people who matter most.

It was David Bowie who said, "Aging is an extraordinary process where you become the person you always should have been."

The transition

As I get older, I find the impulsiveness of my youth calming, my words more thoughtful. I hear my father's voice, "Out of your mouth, printed," cautioning me to think before I speak or act. And I know that his words were actually his own late mother's words, paving the path of wisdom a generation before him.

In 1985, older adults comprised 11 percent of the U.S. population, according to the **National Institute on Aging**. By 2010, they made up 13 percent of the population. Today, more than 40 million Americans are age 65 or older, and by the year 2030, it is expected that seniors will fill 20 percent of our population.

As our population ages, it falls on the shoulders of those in midlife to help make those transitions, and those later years, manageable. According to **Pew**

Research Center surveys, 1 in 7 middle-aged adults provides financial support to both an aging parent and a child simultaneously.

From where I stand, I theorize that it would be my honor to help my parents. After all, they helped me. But I say that without having to do so today.

How would it feel, I wonder, if I had to welcome a parent into my home while trying to usher children out to stand on their own two feet? What additional stresses would I bear?

I think of my grandparents' generation, when aging parents moved in with families without question, into far smaller houses than we inhabit today.

In the sepia-tone of hindsight, I can idealize that situation – “Of course grandma can live with us!” What a benefit to have three or four generations under one roof. You really learn who you are.

Or maybe the stress and burden caused early heart attacks and shorter lives. (My great-grandparents did not live nearly as long as their children or their grandchildren, for a variety of reasons.)

Whatever the reality, I can't know until I'm there. In the meantime, I remain grateful to have my parents, active and involved, and my children, eager and kind, the bookends of my life. This sandwich generation position has benefits.

Family photo of the Golodners

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