

Relating Beyond Advice

There is . . . a time to be silent, and a time to speak
(Eccles. 3:1, 7).

AL had always shared his knowledge with his children. In fact, he loved teaching them how to change the oil in the car, balance the checkbook, or ski down a “black diamond” mountain.

But Al was not prepared for his children to become adults. Within four years, all three of his children were out on their own. When they called, he asked questions, then proceeded to give them advice, just as he always had.

“Don’t forget to get those tires checked now,” he would say before hanging up.

Al’s wife, Jenna, tried to talk to him about it.

“Honey, Annie told you that she could take care of the car while she’s at college.”

“Oh, I know—just giving her a friendly reminder,” Al replied.

“She seemed, well, annoyed that you mentioned it to her again.”

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“She didn’t seem that way to me,” Al responded, oblivious to the signs.

A few months later, Al grumbled to Jenna: “When’s the last time Brad called? I think I’ll try to catch him.” He entered the number.

“Hey, son! Glad I caught you. How’s it going?”

Jenna listened, preparing herself.

“Just tell them . . . no, no—don’t do it that way.”

Turning away, Jenna groaned inwardly. *He’s doing it again! After all the times I’ve suggested he back off with giving advice! He simply won’t listen. He’s pushing Brad and the girls away.*

A short time later, Al found Jenna in the kitchen and complained that Brad had brushed him off. “Said he had a study group. I wish he had time for a good talk.”

Jenna recognized the problem, but Al refused to listen. And when their son tried to talk to him, Al didn’t get it.

“Thanks, Dad, but I can deal with the bank myself.”

“Oh, no problem, son. I’ll just call Frank, and he can take care of it for me.”

Al’s insistence in helping only frustrated his son, who vowed to keep his problems to himself in the future.

Since his kids were little, Al has been giving them advice and guidance, like a good dad. The problem is, he still sees his children’s problems as his problems—but they aren’t. Now, as young adults, his children are growing toward com-

plete independence, just as he taught them. Instructing and guiding them all the time as he did when they were younger is no longer needed or appreciated. Nor does it promote a healthy relationship with his kids. Recognizing that fact is the first step for Al. Backing off from advice, he needs to find a whole new way of connecting with his children, or he won't have much of a relationship with them in the future.

For other parents, the children are more direct: "Dad! Please!" Kelsie said, "I don't need you to always tell me how to do things. I know how to do it myself. You taught me—remember?"

Unfortunately, sometimes even the direct approach doesn't work. The end result? Exactly what we as parents don't want—we alienate our children. They withdraw, as Brad in the first story did.

From our side of the fence, it's frustrating to see our kids make the same mistakes we made. If only they would listen, they would save themselves so much hassle.

What is advice, really? That's easy, you say. Advice is to make recommendations, to counsel or teach. Some synonyms include *guidance*, *teaching*, *instruction*, *opinion*, *suggestion*, and *wisdom*. Giving advice is how parents have been nurturing since our children were born. It's second nature to teach, remind, and correct. It's how we show our loving concern.

The trouble is, adult children don't especially want to be guided, taught, or instructed by parents any longer. Not seeing our input as particularly loving, they respond with hostility or withdrawal.

Remember—they've already been shaped by years of our opinion-giving and suggestions. It's time they exercise their own wisdom muscles. So why don't we let them?

It's All About Control

At the heart of giving advice lies the issue of control. It's frightening to think of taking our hands off, to release our beloved child into the big, bad world. There's fear, the uncertainty of what might happen. But as parents with faith in Jesus Christ, we must surrender our desire to control and place our confidence and trust in God. We need to remind ourselves that He loves our children more than we do. He'll walk with them, wherever they go, whatever they're doing. Now our job as parents is to rest in that knowledge and surrender back to God the Father the control we've had since they were born.

Honest Confrontation

Karen's daughter-in-law opened her eyes to her need to change.

Michelle didn't mince words. "Karen," she said, "you're too controlling. You need to let us make our own decisions now."

Controlling. Me? Controlling? I thought I was only being caring. Instead of taking offense at Michelle's words, Karen spent time thinking about them. She finally concluded that Michelle was right. After all, hadn't she (Karen) worried that her son's recently purchased car might not be good on mileage? And hadn't she taken it upon herself to hunt all over town for the best deal on house paint for them? And hadn't she worried that he might be renewing friendships with some old buddies who had once been a bad influence on him?

Back off. Back off . . . were the words that began to come to Karen each time she found herself running his life. And the best thing is, two pluses came out of her daughter-in-law's

candor: (1) the great relief at knowing she (Karen) didn't have to figure out everything about her children's lives as well as her own, (2) the realization that just as she was controlling her kids' lives, she tended to be a controlling person in other areas also—with her husband and friends.

"I'm thankful that instead of hiding frustrations and resentments, my daughter-in-law had the boldness to speak up. And I'm thankful I listened."

Heeding Our Spouses

"My husband tried to tell me I was giving too much advice to our grown son and his wife on everything from buying a car to whether or not their toddler was big enough to handle grapes," Marilyn said.

"A sample conversation might go like this: 'Let them be,' Paul would say. 'They need to make their own decisions.'"

"'But what if it's the wrong one? What if they go buy that house and it's more than they can afford? What if they haven't even thought about property taxes?'"

"'Then they'll find out. But it has to be their experience—not ours,' Paul said.

"'Then what can we do?'"

"'We can be available for discussion. Pray about it. And that's it.'"

"'I can't. I can't just do nothing when I know more about what they're doing than they do.'"

"'Marilyn,' my husband said, sighing, 'instead of appreciating your wonderful advice, you'll only make enemies. Let them be!'"

"It took a few more bouts of offering my son and daughter-in-law unwanted advice, but guess what? The more I held

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my tongue, the more the two of them began asking for my advice!”

Author Mary Deatrack in her book *It Hurts to Love*, relates this visual exercise to help release our children to God:

Picture in your mind putting your son or daughter in a gift box. Then wrap the box with beautiful party paper and ribbon. Then imagine the glorious throne of God situated at the top of a flight of stairs. In your mind, walk up those stairs with your gift-wrapped package and put it down at the feet of Jesus, who sits on the throne. Wait as

Jesus bends, picks up the package, puts it on His lap, removes the wrappings, takes off the box lid and lifts your child out. After you have seen Jesus holding your child, then walk back down the stairs, turning midway to look back and assure yourself that Jesus is still holding your youngster. Thank God for taking control.¹

In our desire to connect with our children on an adult, mature level, we must keep asking ourselves the question *Will this action or these words help in my goal to build a healthier, stronger relationship with my child?* By trusting, accepting, respecting, withholding our advice, and relinquishing control, we’re sending a powerful message of affirmation. It’s like saying, “I know you can do it.” Saying nothing is nonverbal communication that speaks more powerfully than any amount of words.

Simply Listen

Carrie's 22-year-old daughter, Amber, shared an apartment in another part of the state. She called home to say she was having a bad week and wanted to come for a weekend visit.

Carrie said, "Did you lose your job?"

"No," Amber said.

"Did you have a disagreement with your boyfriend?"

"No," Amber replied.

She arrived Friday evening and spent some time with a hometown friend before coming home. That night her dad sat with her outside as they did some stargazing and talking. When he came in, he told Carrie that their daughter was fine, just discouraged about the demands of the real world. Along with rent and bills, her student loans and car insurance were coming due soon.

Carrie listened to her daughter too. Her complaints were nothing major—just life issues all adults have to deal with.

"So," Carrie says, "we did what we could do. We listened and encouraged. There was nothing we could do to solve anything, and even if there was, she didn't want it solved. She just wanted some tender loving care from her mom and dad."

Fortunately, Carrie and her husband recognized their daughter's need to simply "be" without offering advice or, worse, trying to fix her problems.

A Kinder, Gentler Guidance

"I try really hard not to toss out my two cents' worth all the time. Maybe it's still in the realm of advice-giving, but

what works for me is to share stories from my own life. I'm not preachy or anything. I just tell it like it happened and don't offer any kind of moral. I just let it be. Somehow, it's softer, and my daughters seem to respond better."

"Sometimes," Jim says, "the best thing to do is tell the kids where they can go to get the help they need instead of my always having to be the problem-solver or the advice-giver. I'll give them the name and number of a financial adviser I know and leave it at that. It's their choice as to whether they call him or not. In the past, I would have been all over them, telling them how to invest their money and fund their IRAs. I still bite my tongue a lot, but I think our communication has improved."

Waiting Until Asked

Harvey's son, Paul, was considering moving his wife and young family to be closer to his roots in a remote part of Montana, near his parents. Paul and Jan were fed up with city life and wanted a nice, small town in which to raise their family.

"What do you think, Dad?" they asked.

Harvey says his kids expect him to have an answer for everything. "The buck stops here is what they think. Only problem is, I didn't have a clue as to what would be best for them. Of course, we want our son and his family nearby, but I doubted they would be able to get jobs in their field so far from the city. So I suggested they make a list with two columns, one for the pluses and one for the minuses. At the end of a certain period of time, say two weeks, put all the facts together and make a decision. And make sure it's unanimous."

“Thanks, Dad,” Paul said. “You always know what to do.”

Harvey admits he was dumbfounded. “I do? I thought I was passing the buck. All I did was share a little wisdom.” There are adult children, too, who are so dependent on their parents’ wisdom that they can’t seem to make a move without calling home. While parents might secretly love the frequent consultations, being a crutch for our children doesn’t help them become separate, independent people. They constantly call and want to know what to do or how to tackle a problem. Wise parents recognize that providing the answers for their maturing children is not helping them develop their own decision-making skills. Easing out of the advice-giving role, in this instance, may be the path of least resistance and the course of best, wisest wisdom.

Helping Them Develop Decision-Making Skills

When Marlene called home about a new job opportunity, she laid out the benefits of the new position as well as the present job, expecting her parents to tell her which way to go.

Instead, Frank and Maggie asked questions:

- “Would this be a step up for you?”
- “Would you be challenged by the new duties?”
- “Will it give you more responsibility?”
- “Will you be happy?”
- “Is the pay raise significant?”
- “Will you be required to work longer hours?”

By asking the right questions, you help your children express the concerns and challenges of the decision. Pray with them about it, on the phone and in your own devotional time, asking for God’s wisdom for them as they make the choice.

Frank and Maggie determined that their daughter would not be as happy in the new position, but they didn't tell her that. They let her work through it, and eventually she came to the same conclusion, maturing in the process.

Maggie said, "Honey, Dad and I think you made the right decision. We're proud of you."

As easy as it would have been for them to tell their daughter what they thought and why, they recognized that the lesson of learning to make important life decisions is far more crucial to master.

A Biblical Example: The Prodigal Son

The Bible offers parents all kinds of wisdom, even with adult children. In the story of the prodigal son, we see an example of a parent who did not offer unsolicited advice. He's the perfect role model for this stage of parenting. (See Luke 15:11-32.)

When his son came to him and asked for his inheritance, the father could have said, "No way," or he could have given it to his son with all kinds of advice and strings attached. Of course, he had to have known that this son might squander his share of the family wealth, leaving him penniless for his future. And it had to have been excruciating to hold his tongue, not to offer advice or strings. Why didn't he?

In this father's wisdom, he knew the lessons his son would learn would be far greater than the loss of an inheritance (although in our materialistic culture especially, this is very hard to accept).

So what did the son gain by his father's lack of advice-giving? First, he learned humility. After wasting his fortune on foolish pleasures, he was left to feed on the slop of pigs.

It was in that time of humiliation and need that he realized that his father's servants were treated far better than he was. In the shadow of his own immaturity and selfishness, he saw his parent in a new light—the light of respect, the light of generosity and goodness.

So the son returned home, humbled, destitute, with all trace of boastfulness gone. His father welcomed him back with open arms, happy to see his son again. How could he do that, this wise father? Didn't he want to scream and shout at his child for all his selfish waste? My guess is that he did, but he must have realized it would serve no useful purpose in his son's maturation process. No words were needed. He must have remembered the goal—to maintain a relationship with his adult child.

This biblical father trusted completely in God's ability to watch over his son. He didn't exert his own manipulations to control his son, to try and shape him into the man he wanted him to become. Instead, he surrendered to God's sovereignty to complete the process his son was in. He trusted God with the results. It's time for us to do the same.

Up until now, our parenting task has been to teach our children to make wise decisions, to become independent people. By the time they enter adulthood, they're ready to test their wings and prove they can make it on their own and be ready to teach their own children.

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Our comfort is that God's Word abounds with wisdom, and through prayer and listening we receive the guidance we need. God speaks to us, but ultimately we have free will to make decisions about our lives. We should follow God's parenting example and allow our adult children the same privilege to choose their own way.

Parenting Pointers

In learning to live beyond giving advice, you can take the following steps:

1. Listen for cues from your children that you're offering too much.
 - Are they annoyed when you offer advice?
 - Are they avoiding you?
 - Are you constantly reminding them, asking them questions?
 - Are you ignoring their requests to back off?
 - Are you honoring their ability to manage?
 - Have they asked you openly to stop giving advice?
2. Surrender your children to God.
 - Do you trust God?
 - Do you believe God is capable of caring for your children?
 - Are you practicing what you believe—that is, it is important to release your children by stepping back?
3. Ask yourself, *Will this action or these words help to build a healthier, stronger relationship with my children?*
 - Do I accept my children?
 - Do I respect my children?
 - Do I acknowledge my children as adults now?

- Do I try to control my adult children?
- Do I believe that withholding advice will send a powerful, affirming message to my children?
- Do I help my children to problem-solve for themselves?
- Do I point them to where they can get the advice they need from others?