

## Baby Boomers and the Art of Parenting Adult Kids

Clare Ansberry

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**Linda Hoskins** would like to believe her adult son considers her a friend.

She's a baby boomer and boomers tend to think they're cooler than their own parents were, she says.

"Therefore why wouldn't our kids want to hang out with us all the time. We're their friends, right?" the 69-year-old executive director of the American Pie Council asks half-jokingly.



Linda and her son, Rick, would see each other several times a week before she and her husband moved to Florida. She and her husband will return to Chicago in the fall for Rick's son's football season. Photo: Daniella Gomez/Magnafoto

Her son sees it a little differently. "She's my mom," says Rick, 44. While very close—seeing each other several times a week until she recently moved and texting in between—his mom isn't on the same level as his friends, nor would he want her to be.

Baby boomers are far more immersed with their own grown children than their parents were with them, says Karen Fingerman, a professor of Human Development and Family Sciences at the University of Texas, Austin. [She found](#) that parents in the early 2000s offered about twice as much counsel and practical support (which could be anything from babysitting grandkids, running their grown kids' errands or reviewing their résumés) as parents did in the 1980s. Such deep ties can make it hard to let kids go or accept that they will likely love their children more deeply than their kids can love them.

## **Family Matters**

Tips for boomer parents dealing with their adult kids

- Don't give unsolicited advice. If they want your opinion or need your help, they will ask.
- Let your kids make mistakes. You did and learned from them.
- Make a life of your own, so your children don't feel guilty as they move on with their own life.
- Manage your own expectations. The fewer expectations, the less likely you are going to be disappointed when they don't call or visit as often as you would like.
- Keep in touch in ways that are meaningful to them, whether that's texting, FaceTime, or phone calls.
- Set limits. If you can't or don't want to babysit all the time, let them know.
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Source: Linda Stroh, Kathy McCoy and The Wall Street Journal

Boomers are also the first group of parents in the psychological era, when therapy became more commonplace and relationships were closely examined, says William Doherty, a professor of Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota. Their own parents were concerned about a child being safe, getting a job, and getting married. "They didn't obsess about how they were feeling about you," he says, adding that there are far more elements of friendship in boomers' relationships with kids. "In many ways, that's good. But then you have to deal with disappointment if kids are not as close as you would hope for."

That's what Linda Stroh found when she and a fellow author surveyed nearly 1,000 baby boomers for their book, "Getting Real about Getting Older."

"My kids use language like 'my family' and 'our family' and they don't mean us," one man commented. "I'm at the mercy of their whims. We see them when they want, not when we want," said another. "I miss my kids. I want to be around them more," one woman said.

It's not that grown kids don't want to be part of a parent's life, but that they are really busy, says Dr. Stroh, herself a boomer and mother of two children, who are very involved with their careers. "If I get a call, I'm thrilled and flattered," says Dr. Stroh, who teaches human

development at the University of California, Santa Cruz.



Art DeConciliis, shown here with his daughter, Samantha DeConciliis-Davin, says his kids often ask him and his wife for advice about jobs and family, something he never would have done with his own father. Photo: DeConciliis Family

Pittsburgh resident Art DeConciliis, 58, remembers when he and his wife, Mary Pat, got married. “It was sink or swim,” he says, their parents offering little help or support. Today, his three adult children, all married and living near their Pittsburgh home, frequently call for advice about work, buying a house and starting a family. He’s happy to offer it.

“My self-identity is very closely tied to my relationship with my children. I don’t think that was



the case with my dad. His was wrapped up in his business,” he says. While he sometimes wonders if too much advice-seeking and advice-giving is a good thing, he also felt a little disappointed that his youngest daughter didn’t involve him when she and her husband bought a house.

That daughter, Samantha DeConciliis-Davin, 26, says that while close to her parents, she has always been independent. Buying a house without their input wasn’t a slight as much as it was an affirmation of their lifelong guidance. “I still depend on them for advice,” she says. They are the first ones she calls if something happens at work.

### **Share Your Thoughts**

How did your relationship with your parents change once you became an adult? Join the conversation below.

Kathy McCoy, a psychotherapist specializing in family dynamics, says some distance can be a good thing. Kids should refrain from telling their parents everything and parents should refrain from trying to direct their adult child or grandchild’s life. “That distance can lead to a new kind of closeness,” says Dr. McCoy, who wrote “We Don’t Talk Anymore,” about estrangement between parents and their adult children.

Aline Harris, who lives in Monterey, says she was a helicopter mom when her two sons, now 49 and 46, were children. When her youngest son entered the Peace Corps and her oldest went to the Yucatán Peninsula to study, she cried and told them she would worry.

“Sometimes, it’s hard work letting go,” says Ms. Harris, 74. That was especially true when her oldest son married a woman she found difficult to get along with and moved several hours away to a rural area. Ms. Harris consulted a life coach, who reminded her that there were two circles. An inner circle with her son, his wife and young child. And an outer circle, with Ms. Harris and her husband.





Former helicopter parent Aline Harris, shown here on vacation in Alaska with her husband, grown sons and their wives and two grandsons, learned to let go when her sons went their own ways after college. From left: Nick Harris, Aira Harris, Steven Harris, Zoe Harris, Aline Harris, Craig Harris. The boys in front are Zachary, left, and Noah Harris. Photo: John Sibert

“Don’t try to put yourself in the inner circle,” she recalls her coach saying.

Her other son Craig, who went into the Peace Corps, says it wasn’t until he had children of his own that he began talking with his parents, especially his mom, on a friend level. When he and his wife decided to home-school their twin boys, they discussed it with his parents, who didn’t voice opposition. “It was more like ‘Are you kids sure you think this is the best decision? Have you thought everything through?’” he recalls.



Mark and Georgie Boehlen—college sweethearts who broke off their engagement under pressure from Georgie’s parents—reconnected later in life on Facebook. They say it’s important for parents to let go of their own expectations and focus on their child’s vision. Photo: Boehlen Family

Georgie Boehlen will never forget her parents coming between her and her college sweetheart, Mark, almost 50 years ago, because Mark was Catholic. “My father nearly threw him downstairs,” she says.

The couple, who live in Florida, reconnected on Facebook after Mark was widowed and

Georgie was divorced. They married eight years ago, but the early experience with Georgie's rigid parents helped shape their own approach toward their grown children.

"You have to let go of your expectations and look at their visions," says Mr. Boehlen, a 73-year-old father of five. A retired engineer, he wanted his kids to go to college and be engineers. Only one graduated from college, and another, who didn't graduate, works as an engineer. "I talk with them about how best to reach their goals, but let them know I will support them in anything they do," he says.

Ms. Boehlen's oldest daughter has eight children, including four adopted with special needs. "I'm a product of the 60s when zero population growth, not big families, were a big thing," says Ms. Boehlen, 74. "They are going to have lives you would never have predicted but they are happy with what they are doing and that is our main concern."

Boomer Linda Hoskins and her husband recently moved to Florida. Her son, Rick, bought the family home in Chicago, where he, his wife and three children live. She and her husband plan on renting a place in Chicago in the fall so they can go to their grandson's football games.

As for her son saying she is a "mom," not necessarily a friend, she thinks that is probably better. "Friends come and go," she says. "Moms don't."

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