

## WHEN ROLES REVERSE: Parenting Our Parents

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*My child take care of your father when he grows old; give him no cause for worry as long as he lives. Be sympathetic even if his mind fails him; don't look down on him just because you are strong and healthy. The Lord will not forget the kindness you show to your father; it will help make up for your sins.*

[Sirach 3:12-14 (GNT)]

Aging is not optional. It's going to happen to all of us. That includes you, me, and our parents. The challenge we face today is that, with everyone living longer, we may have to reverse roles and, perhaps, spend more time parenting our parents than we spent parenting our children. Normally, role reversal happens so quickly that we are not adequately prepared for it. There are millions of men and women in their 30's 40's, 50's, 60's, and beyond who thought they'd finished parenting but have been drawn back into a new role. Now, suddenly, they find themselves caring for their elderly parents and other family members, often while still raising their children at home.

Some people call this "switching roles." What it means is that our new job, one we've never done before, is to be sure our parents are safe and cared for, just as our parents once did for us. For most of us, this role reversal is not a "planned parenthood," although in today's aging society it has become almost a rite of passage. We are faced with a situation in which our elderly parents can no longer function on their own, and we have to help guide their decisions.

The decision on how to manage the needs of our elderly parents is the first struggle the caregivers face. We are pulled and plagued by feelings of guilt and frustration when trying to make decisions about what is best for our parents while also managing our own lives. Sometimes, in addition to caring for an elderly parent, we find ourselves acting as the communication link or switchboard for other family members' concerns and issues.

So what's the problem? The problem is that our parents are not going to grow up, become more mature, eventually appreciate our efforts, and then begin their adult lives. Instead, more likely, there will be many occasions of denial and disagreement, along with a decline in health and abilities. It's not unusual for aging parents to be resistant to the realities that they are facing. They may be rebellious or difficult; they may not want the help that they need.

If we have aging parents, the reality is that we may become their caregivers. There is an urgent need to start the conversations and deal openly with a sensitive subject – a plan for caregiving. The best way to plan for the future is to have a candid, loving conversation with our parents. Ask the hard questions with as much patience and tact as possible, but do ask them.

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