

Sandwich Generation: Caregivers in the Middle

Many middle-age adults find themselves torn between the demands of raising children and caring for aging parents. According to a study conducted by the National Alliance for Caregiving and the AARP Public Policy Institute, more than 43 million Americans help care for their elderly relatives.¹

The squeeze is on the *sandwich generation*, because many couples choose to start families later in life. Even parents whose children are grown can get sandwiched if they have to care for grandchildren on a full or part-time basis. And when adult children move back home, a caregiver could find herself caring for aging parents, adult children, and grandchildren—all at the same time.

Just when you thought life might be simpler and you'd have more time to focus on personal interests, leisure, and travel; everyone wants a piece of you. Ease your load by taking these steps:

- Make your boundaries clear.
- Discuss your concerns openly.
- Consider long-term financial plans.
- Take advantage of community services.
- Maintain important relationships with family and friends.
- Care for yourself emotionally and physically.

Identify your own needs and desires, and find out what matters to the children and parents in your care. Get the issues on the table, reach for compromises, and find solutions that will work for everyone.

Key Tips

#1. Help may be easier to find than you think. Many organizations are designed to help caregivers. Family or friends might be willing to pitch in, if you ask. Check out your local senior center, place of worship, or hospital to find out what's available.

#2. Caring for yourself is a necessity, not a luxury. You can't help someone else properly if you're run down. If you care for an elderly person and children, it's vital to get regular, relaxing, and healthful breaks. Don't feel guilty about it—it benefits the people you care for, too.

#3. Plan strategies for how to complete all your duties. Use a calendar to track everyone's appointments, and combine tasks when you can. For instance, schedule your father's doctor appointment around your daughter's soccer practice, and let your teenage driver practice by taking Grandma shopping.

Specifics

Communicate openly.

If you feel sandwiched, the worst thing you can do is suffer in silence. First off, talk with your aging parent about his or her wishes and priorities. Find out if he or she has made plans or decisions about what should happen next. Talk to your siblings about how they envision helping out. Ask the same of adult children who are living with you.

Don't leave younger kids out of the discussion. Find out how they feel about the time you spend caring for your parent. They might feel left out. Maybe they'd welcome a bigger role in helping you care for your parent, or perhaps what they really need is a guarantee of a half-hour of your time each evening before bed. You may not be able to fulfill all your child's requests, but just having this discussion may help.

Don't assume it's best for your parent to move in with you.

This may seem like a tempting option because everyone would be under one roof, but ask yourself these questions first:

- Do you have the space—and is it accessible for someone with limited mobility?
- Would your parent be able to tolerate your family's normal routines, including your daughter's daily drum practice or your son's love of TV cartoons and video games?
- How do your partner and kids feel about the idea?
- Do your kids get along with your parent?
- What contributions can your parent make to the household (rent, housecleaning, child care, gardening)?
- What if it doesn't work out?

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If your parent moves in with you, make sure you establish clear house rules and roles about issues such as

- Eating schedules
- Cleanup responsibilities
- Laundry duty
- Transportation
- Quiet time
- Privacy

Discuss finances.

The financial squeeze can be especially tight if you're caught between needy parents and children. How can you afford a housekeeper for Dad when you're trying to save for your daughter's first year in college? Discuss the cost of different care arrangements with all parties, from your parent to your siblings, and partner. If your mother can't manage alone anymore, it's time for her to tell you about her financial situation, including her sources of income and savings. Forecast income and expenses over the short and long term.

Remain flexible.

Expect care arrangements to change. For many families, one decision rarely settles the matter forever. Your teenagers may go off to college; your mother may move in with you—but someday, she might need more care than you can provide, or maybe she'll decide she needs a quieter place to call home. Respect everyone's needs, and adjust to changing conditions.

Don't neglect yourself or your family to care for your parent.

This is the toughest advice to accept. Plan outings with your partner, with your kids, and by yourself. Let your employer know what's going on, but try not to let your performance suffer.

Take advantage of outside help. Respite care is often available for caregivers on a weekly basis or for a family vacation. Don't be afraid to ask other family members and friends for help.

Many communities have caregiver support groups, where you can learn how other people juggle their competing demands. Support groups offer the comfort of talking with others who experience similar struggles. The groups are often free, and you don't need to commit to regular attendance.

Whatever you do, don't give up on the plans you made for how to spend your middle years. Maybe you wanted to travel across the country or enroll in cooking school. Settle for a shorter trip, if that's what it takes, or tuck in a course here and there when you can manage it. You may not attain your dream, but you'll be less resentful if you fulfill at least part of it.

Reference

1. National Alliance for Caregiving & the AARP Public Policy Institute. (2015, June). *Caregiving in the U.S.* Retrieved July 31, 2019, from <https://www.caregiving.org>

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