

Parenting Adult Children

Real Stories of Families Turning
Challenges into Successes

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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CHAPTER 1

Detaching with Love: How to Stop Enabling Overly Dependent or Addicted Children

Or, “What about Bobby?”

The attractive, retired couple sitting across from me in my therapy room could have been actors in an AARP television commercial. Both had pleasant, unlined faces, silver-white hair, and poised, relaxed posture. They wore stylish, high-end sports clothes and spoke with the calm dignity that comes from reaching the age of sixty-five and surviving numerous life challenges together. Yet despite their self-assured exteriors, here the two were, talking to me, a psychotherapist.

They might have been seeking counseling over the loss of a friend, or changes in their health or income. But these common seniors' issues weren't what had brought Bob and Jenny Martin to my office that day. No, the Martins were here to discuss their forty-year-old son, Robert Junior, or “Bobby,” who had just come home to live with them, again.

As a career therapist, I've had the privilege of treating people experiencing various life challenges; children with autism; men

and women with AIDS; and combat veterans and domestic violence victims with post-traumatic stress disorder. But over the last ten years, a new and growing client group has emerged in my practice—parents experiencing troubled relationships with their adult children. On meeting Bob and Jenny Martin, I soon learned that the relationship with their son Bobby wasn't just "troubled," but that recently it had become life-threatening for them, as well.

Social scientists tell us that today more adult children are living with their parents than at in any time in our history since the agricultural era, when multi-generational families cohabitating under the same roof were a norm. This trend toward adult children either returning home or never leaving home in the first place is due to several *other* social trends: the changing job market, high unemployment, increased divorce rates, and an economy that has suffered both inflation and recession several times over the last twenty five years. All of these forces have caused many adult children to seek help from their parents in ways that young adults didn't have to fifty or sixty years ago.

Sixty years ago, most young parents were survivors of the Great Depression and World War II, who overcame their hardships to become one of the most affluent societies in American history. Fortunately for them, economic and social conditions following World War II supported their upward mobility. They were able to raise a generation of children, the "Baby Boomers," who were used to a high standard of living and grew up expecting to provide the same solid financial foundation for their own children.

Unfortunately for those Baby Boomers who subsequently became parents, the economic conditions under which they raised their children changed. Decades of inflation, recessions, and high

unemployment have left many of these Boomers' kids, today's young adults between the ages of eighteen and forty, struggling to keep their jobs, pay their bills and try, often unsuccessfully, to avoid succumbing to massive credit card debt.

Developmental psychologists add another twist to this discussion, and one of the foremost of these experts is Dr. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett. In the past, he tells us, young adults reached full adult status by completing five essential developmental milestones, usually by the end of their twenties:

- Completing school
- Leaving home
- Becoming financially independent
- Marrying or finding a significant other
- Having children.

In numerous articles and books, Arnett argues for redefining the twenties as a distinct new developmental step, which he calls “emerging adulthood,” a time for finding one’s sense of purpose in life. He points out that as recently as a generation ago, most young adults did successfully complete the developmental steps described above by the time they reached the age of thirty. Now however, most young adults may not accomplish all five steps until much later in life, if at all. This lag, other social scientists argue, is as much the result of changes occurring in the young adult brain as it is the consequence of various economic and societal stressors. Considering all of this, it’s safe to say that whatever the reasons, today’s young adults are maturing at a slower pace, and depending on mom and dad to support them until they do reach full adulthood.

This is what had happened to Bobby Martin more than once, his parents told me. Diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder in grade school, Bobby had struggled to complete high school and flunked out of college. Since then, his life had become a succession of failures. After each job that ended, or girlfriend or male roommate who rejected him, he had come home to live with his parents while he tried to figure out what to do next. Eventually, Bobby began self-medicating with drugs and alcohol. Recently, his drug and alcohol abuse had escalated to the point that he was stealing money from his parents, and selling stolen goods in the community to support his habit.

One evening when Bob and Jenny confronted him, Bobby became violent and ran through the house, turning over large pieces of furniture, and eventually assaulting Jenny, trying to choke her. Bob was able to overcome Bobby then called 911 as his son ran out of the house. Shortly afterward, however, Bob began to experience chest pains and was rushed to the ER, where he learned he was having a heart attack.

“I suppose I should have seen this coming,” Jenny sighed. “Bobby was always so impulsive, so intent on getting his way. As a child, he couldn’t wait for anything . . . just had to have it now. If he didn’t, he threw the biggest tantrums.” She looked at her husband with an embarrassed smile. “Bob warned me about giving into him, but I’m afraid I didn’t listen. Sometimes I feel like I’ve created a monster.”

Bob reached out and covered her hand with his. “Now Jen, there’s no sense in blaming yourself,” he said. “We both raised this boy together. I’m sure I could have done all kinds of things differently too.”

In his efforts to comfort his wife, Bob had revealed a key factor

in their family struggles, referencing their forty-year-old son as “this boy.” Bobby was indeed an under-developed male, a child in a man’s body, or “man-child.” To his credit, Bob recognized the futility of wallowing in guilt, and supported his wife by trying to move her beyond that counter-productive feeling. But I doubted he fully comprehended the significance of his own language.

“Did you hear what you just said?” I asked him, and he wriggled a bit in his chair.

“Did I say something wrong?” he replied.

“Not at all,” I reassured him. “In fact, I think you just said something very helpful. You referred to Bobby as ‘this boy,’ which, in fact, he is in many ways. He can’t keep a job, can’t sustain a relationship with a woman or even male friends, and keeps running home to his folks, then turns on them, too, when things don’t go his way. That’s not the behavior of an adult male.”

Bob nodded, but still seemed puzzled. “Then how is my calling him a boy so helpful?”

“The words we use convey our expectations,” I explained. “If Bobby acts like a boy and we call him a boy, then we subtly enable him to remain a boy.”

Jenny was on the same page right away. “But he’s not really a boy,” she said, turning to Bob. “He’s a man, or at least he should be anyway. So, if we refer to him as a man and expect him to act like one, maybe things would be different.”

Bob nodded and turned to me. “Makes sense,” he said. “But how do we come to really *think* of him as a man when he doesn’t *act* like one?”

“What does Bobby do well?” I asked. Bob and Jenny didn’t hesitate for a moment.

“He’s always been good at anything mechanical,” Jenny said.

Bob chuckled. “Remember the time he took the crystal chandelier apart just to see how it all fit together?”

“How could I forget?” she laughed. “I had a big dinner party planned for that night, but he got it all back together in time for my guests.”

They went on in this fashion for several minutes, recounting tales of Bobby’s boyhood, and the strengths he’d exhibited as a youth. I soon learned that Bobby was artistic, sensitive, and good with small children and animals.

“So, Bobby has lots of positive traits and talents,” I said. “Can you give him things to do that capitalize on his abilities and give him some sense of competence?”

They glanced at one another. “Maybe *had* lots of positive traits would be a better description now,” Bob replied.

“Since the drugs and alcohol took hold, he’s not done much of anything positive,” Jenny explained. I nodded in recognition—the story was just all too familiar. How many times had I heard a similar tale of some bright and promising life brought to ruin by substance abuse?

But, there was still more to Bobby’s downward spiral, the Martins soon informed me. He had also been a talented baseball player, excelling at pitching, and dreaming of becoming a professional. His coaches had told them he was a true prodigy.

“What happened?” I asked and watched their faces fall.

“He broke his pitching arm in a car accident soon after he started driving . . . a DUI actually,” Jenny explained. “It was never the same after that.”

“Funny, I’d kinda forgotten about that,” Bob said. They both sat for a moment in pensive silence.