Anticipating Your Obsolescence

by Wayne Rice

"It's not that I don't like my parents. I know they love me and that what they do they really think is in my best interests. It's just that I feel trapped. I know I'm young, that my judgment is not perfect, and that I'm going to make mistakes. But they make mistakes too! I'm not a little kid anymore. I have a brain, and I can figure things out for myself. I just can't stand them telling me what to do all the time. Sometimes I just wish my parents would let me move out and get an apartment of my own. I could manage; I know I could. They'd be surprised. I really don't need them anymore."

Like it or not, there comes a time in every young person's life when they would like to make their parents disappear. And that time usually comes sooner than we anticipate. In fact, the process begins at early adolescence.

Your kids need you around more than they realize, of course, but in a different way. No longer do they want you supervising their every move. They don't want Mom telling the barber or hair stylist how to cut their hair. They don't want Dad telling them where they can go, whom they can be with, or what they can do with their money. No longer do they want someone else running their lives.

So when your kids become teenagers, they may try to fire you as their parent. But don't worry, they'll hire you back as a consultant. As your kids change, so does your role in their lives.

This shouldn't come as any surprise. Parenting is a wonderful privilege and responsibility, but it wasn't meant to last forever. Remember, the goal of parenting is to work yourself out of a job. Your purpose is to provide care for children until such time when they can take care of themselves. It's a temporary job with planned obsolescence built right into it.

This is hard for some parents to accept, especially if their identity or self-worth is wrapped up in being a mom or dad. Stay-at-home moms are especially vulnerable to feelings of loss when children get older. In today's world there's a lot of pressure on women to seek fulfilling careers outside the home. When a woman chooses to be a full-time mom, she generally does so with the conviction that full-time motherhood *is* a career choice. It's a job requiring specific skills and responsibilities that include the supervision and care of children. When the children no longer need or want that constant supervision and care, it's like finding yourself unemployed.

Feelings of irrelevance are heightened when this coincides with Mom and Dad's midlife years–when they find themselves struggling with other disagreeable career and identity

issues. The inevitable loss of one's youth and the realization that options are getting more and more limited can create some unsettled feelings of anxiety and frustration.

These are natural life changes that happen to just about everybody. Time marches on, and the changes that come with it are inevitable. The best way to cope with them is to anticipate them, welcome them, and adjust to them accordingly.

Many parents tend to resist any changes in their parenting role. But kids change whether parents do or not. When parents don't make adjustments to the changing developmental needs of their kids, they risk alienating them and inhibiting their growth. To be willing to change is to communicate respect and love.

Stages of Parenting
Below are five parenting stages that represent changes in your child's development as well as corresponding changes in your role as a parent. These can help you evaluate your readiness for the day when you will set your young adult free. They don't necessarily correspond to particular ages (which varies from child to child), but they do represent a progression toward independence and self-reliance that we want to facilitate and encourage rather than to inhibit.

1. Catering

Child: I'm hungry!
Parent: Here you are sweetie, some delicious mashed carrots. Yum yum.

During the first year or so of your children's lives, your role is primarily that of caretaker or servant. You set your schedule according to theirs and jump every time they cry, whine, or make a demand on you. You are at their beck and call, allowing them to interrupt conversations and indulging them in all sorts of behavior that would not be tolerated in older children. You treat them like royalty and wheel them through shopping centers and other public places in portable thrones while passersby stop to pay homage.

It doesn't take that long for infants and toddlers to conclude that the world revolves around them and that everyone else exists to do their bidding. After all, they have known nothing else.

2. Controlling

Child: I'm hungry!
Parent: Then eat your green beans! No dessert until you do!

As your children reach their second birthdays, they experience a revolution that overturns their previous understanding of reality. This revolution leads to a *revelation* that they are not the center of the universe after all–*you are.* You are no longer their caretaker or servant, but their authority figure and teacher. When they were in diapers, you paid inordinate amounts of attention to them. But now that they are older (and for the foreseeable future), they are required to pay attention to you. No longer do they make the rules; you do.

Understandably, this turn of events can come as a real shocker to toddlers who preferred things the way they were. They don't usually surrender easily. They often throw tantrums, hurl themselves to the ground, scream bloody murder, fling plates of food to the floor, and otherwise make their parents believe they are savages. That's why this age is often called "the terrible two's."

Still, it is important for parents to make this transition as early as possible and to stay the course. If you don't settle authority issues early and completely when the children are young, you leave yourself wide open for some tough sledding when they become teenagers.

3. Coaching

Child: I'm hungry!

Parent: Don't eat a lot of junk food before dinner, Jason. You'll ruin your appetite.

Once children are clear on the issue of authority, you can start playing the role of coach. This usually occurs when your kids are still in their preteens. It involves giving them some power and control over their lives while you still have absolute authority. While they may get to make some decisions on their own, you continue to set the rules. You impose the limits, you determine where the boundaries will be, and you provide healthy doses of coaching, teaching, reprimanding, and correction. Kids are allowed more freedom at this stage.

4. Consulting

Child: I'm hungry!

Parent: If I were you, Jason, I'd eat some fruit. The apples in the refrigerator are delicious.

When kids reach their midteens, they resist controlling and even coaching (which they usually interpret as nagging), and they object to any attempt to micromanage their lives. Like a quarterback on a football team, they now want to call their own plays and live with the consequences. They want coaching and counseling only when it is asked for. They will eventually seek it, but it can't be forced on them.

5. Caring

Child: I'm hungry!

Parent: Lord, please help Jason find a job.

This is the last stage of parenting that releases the child into adulthood. At this stage, you care about your kids and want them to make good decisions, but basically they are on their own. You are finished parenting. No longer should you interfere with their lives in any way except by invitation. Your adult children should know that you are always there for them, willing to offer counsel or help when it's required and asked for, but they are

now in total control. As a parent, you influence them only with your live, support, and prayers.

No clear line of demarcation separates these stages in the parenting process. They blend together in varying degrees all during your parenting years. For example, you may find yourself being a *controller* when it comes to use of the family care, but you may serve as a *counselor* when it comes to helping your teen decide which classes to take in school. You may *coach* her regarding the purchase of a prom dress while limiting yourself to *caring* about her date selection. In other words, the process varies with age, maturity, and specific issues.

The important thing to remember is that you are crucial to this process. Don't underestimate your role. While you may be approaching obsolescence in parenting, you are never unimportant. What you do matters, and your influence is decisive. The key is learning to shift from control to influence.

When children become teenagers, they start resembling the adults they will eventually become. They are off the launching pad, so to speak, moving quickly toward independence. The initial indicators may not be exactly what you had envisioned, and you may wish to reverse the process somehow and force your teenager to remain a child–but you can't. It's too late. It's time to start letting go, to work with your child to function independently someday. This understanding is crucial to your survival as the parent of a teenager.

(Excerpted from the book *Cleared for Takeoff* by Wayne Rice.)

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