

# Generations reverse roles

By Diane Cameron, *USA Today*

The other day, browsing in a Toronto shoe store, I began eavesdropping on a mother and daughter shopping for shoes. The conversation brought back memories: "I don't care what you like; we're not buying those, try on the other pair." The customer stares straight ahead. More exasperation, "For the party you can get what you like, but we're not buying those."

One is rolling her eyes at the shoe salesman; the other slouches in her seat. I remember scenes like this from my teen years, but now it is the fiftysomething daughter doing the chastising and the eighty-something mother annoyed and humiliated that she can't buy the shoes she likes.

I can see pain on the daughter's face as she explains, "The doctor said you can't wear slip-ons; you have to have tie-shoes because of your cane."

We can track the progression of women's lives through shoe shopping. Little girls can't wait to give up babyish tie-shoes for big-girl loafers, then out of loafers and into heels, then wanting cool sneakers, and back and forth, until a grown daughter is telling her mother that she can't buy slip-on shoes any more.

On the surface, taking our mothers shoe shopping is not new, but to be the one holding the credit card and saying yea or nay to clothing, food and housing selections puts adult children in places we never expected to travel to emotionally.

## **Crisis slowly develops**

It happens that I am in this store on this day because I am waiting while my husband meets with his mother's banker. For many years — as a precaution in case of emergency — he has had her power of attorney. We always imagined the emergency would be an accident or catastrophic illness, but this day we are in town because this crisis rose slowly. Mom's accounts are confusing her and she can't keep track of bills, so today her grown son is taking away her credit cards just as he took the car keys a few years ago.

We are comforted intellectually by knowing that this is the "right thing to do," but emotionally no one prepares us to parent our own parent.

As each generation lives longer, we are finding ourselves in the middle and doing double duty; we're the "sandwich generation" with kids of our own and parents whose needs mirror those of the children.

An estimated 22 million U.S. households are caring for a relative older than 50, and when I compare notes with friends, we realize we cover the same topics with our kids and our parents. We talk about drugs and alcohol, driving, handling money wisely and, yes, even sex.

## **Who's the adult?**

In a bookstore I browse in the Parenting section and transpose the titles to get at this role reversal. There is the *What to Expect* series for new moms, and *How to Talk So Teens Will Listen and Listen So Teens Will Talk*. But where is "What to expect as your parents age," or "How to talk so your 86-year-old mother will listen"?

At parenting workshops, we role-play and rehearse scripts to help us be "assertive, yet loving" and to "set clear boundaries." We're advised to send a clear message about who is the adult. Well, who is the adult in the world of aging parents?

We learn to let our kids blow their money to experience the natural consequence of their choices. Should we allow our parents to do the same?

Perhaps the best we can do is to take advantage of the fact that our own future caretakers are standing right beside us when we tell Grandma that she can't drive or buy the shoes she likes. We need to tell our own kids, "Someday this will be you and me, and I am now giving you permission when that day comes, to take away my car keys and my slippery shoes — and to remind me how painful this was."

We might be wearing our own slip-on shoes for a few more years but, in fact, we need to walk in the moccasins of both our parents and our kids as we negotiate this narrow passage in our mid-life.

*Diane Cameron is a freelance writer in New York.*

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