

Catholic Caregivers

'Caregiving is pro-life!'

Caring for Your Children as You Care for Your Aging Parents

If you're a member of the "sandwich generation," if you're taking care of your aging parent as well as your children, it's hard to shake the feeling that if you focus on one generation you're losing sight of the needs of the other.

It can help to remember – to realize – that you're taking care of your parent is good for your children, too. How so?

You're right that your kids also make a sacrifice because you can't be around as much as they would like you to be and, most likely, they have to do more – become more responsible – because you can't be there. (Maybe they have to make their own lunch to take to school. Or you can't be a chaperone at some school event even though you were able to do that a year or so ago.)

Yes, in some ways a child is being deprived of what a parent might be able to give if he or she didn't have caregiving obligations to an older family member (or to a spouse who is ill or to a child with special needs) but – from another perspective – Mom or Dad is giving something to that child or those children that he or she otherwise couldn't give. We mean a front-row view of love in action without any possibility of mistaking the unchangeable fact that true love demands service and sacrifice.

Still . . . it can be a lot to put on little shoulders.

All they may see at first glance is that Mom or Dad isn't there (or is there but is exhausted from caregiving and holding down a job) and they miss not just what that parent does for them (nice meals, rides to practice and so on) but also that person himself or herself. They miss time spent together.

With that in mind, here are a few suggestions if you're taking care of an aging parent and your children:

--Talk about caregiving at a time when neither you nor your child are tired and emotions are *not* running high.

--Do something special with each child, one-on-one.

--Explain what it's like to be a care-*receiver*, how it can be hard to accept help. Talk about why you're

taking care of Grandpa or Grandma and explain – in an age-appropriate way – what his or her condition is.

--Work at establishing a link between your children and your parent. Let them have some time together.

--Remember children can, in small ways, help with caregiving, too.

--Teach what respectful care means and explain the difference between "dignity" and "dignified." Yes, at times, a situation may be less than "dignified" but a person must be treated with dignity.

--Remember to thank the child for making sacrifices and for helping you help your mother or father. □

Advice for 'the Sandwich Generation'

- Remember there is no single "right" way to do this. Trying to exactly mimic what another person has done probably isn't going to work. Each case is unique because the personalities and problems in each case are unique.

- If you don't take care of yourself—take time to eat, sleep, catch your breath and pray—you will burn out quickly and be of little use to anyone, including yourself. The situation in which you find yourself is not a sprint, it's a marathon.

- The big picture can look and feel overwhelming. Sometimes it helps to break it down into the many tiny pieces that make up the whole. What you have to do for your parent. Your children. Your spouse. Your job. Yourself. The lists may be long but somehow no single item is overpowering.

- Prioritize your tasks and give away some of the low-priority duties

- Get support for yourself. Groups for caregivers and organizations that focus on your parent's particular illness or condition can help you deal with what you are facing.

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