



Reverse Parenting

by Dorothy C. Snyder

The exact day it happened is hard to pinpoint. I should have marked the calendar and made a note of it, but I was too upset at the time to even think about it.

Phone calls can often bring good news, but they also can bring disturbing insights. This was definitely one of the latter.

In a phone conversation with my daughter, I mentioned that I planned to visit one of my sons, who lives approximately 500 miles away. Of course, I planned to drive.

“Mom,” she said, “I don’t think that is a good idea. Too many things can happen on the road today. I would rather you didn’t do that.”

What is going on here? I thought.

My daughter is giving me advice about what I should be doing. Isn’t that my job as a parent?

Slowly it dawned on me. She and I must be entering that time of our lives referred to as “role reversal” when children begin parenting their parents. She is now mothering me! That can’t be! That happens when folks get old and vulnerable, and I’m not old—or am I? Just a few years ago, my children were young, and I was the one doing the mothering.

How fast the years went by. The children were babies, then toddlers, then grown young adults.

If I close my eyes, I can see the children leaving for school, with my giving them last-minute instructions and advice. I recall an incident when I had serious reser-

vations about one child's special friend and had to interfere, although I knew my decision would be upsetting. Many times I tried to instruct and to guide them through pitfalls, even though they disagreed.

Images of their growing-up years scroll before my eyes like movie scenes. I can see each child on the first day of school. The experience was different for each but was the same heart-wrenching experience for me. Two of my children could not wait for me to leave them and go home. The other two wanted to go back home with me!

I suffered with each one through the teen years, as they learned about first loves and first losses. Those were exciting times of growth for them and for me.

The seasons of our lives moved on—high school and college graduations, weddings and the births of the grandchildren. I have memories of many proud moments as each child grew and became the responsible, caring adult God intended.

Being a senior adult has many advantages, but one I had not anticipated was this stage in the child-parent relationship. However, it is a privilege, and I have a sense of security knowing they are acting out of love and caring when they give me advice and suggestions. They learned their lessons well. Often I can hear and see myself in my daughters as they now offer advice to me.

I recall times in their youth when I gave advice and instructions and they didn't agree. Tensions developed, but we never lost communication. This most likely will happen in our new relationship, but I will be the one questioning their judgment. Now it is their turn to show patience and love, and my turn to be tolerant and understanding and let love lead the way.

I know it is not their intention to meddle or to interfere in my life, and I realize sometimes I will be resentful of their input, just as they were in their growing-up years.

How sobering it is to realize that life has come full circle. In a perfect world, moving from one stage in a relationship to another would be easy. In the real world, the transition requires adjustment and understanding from each generation.

I have found no easy pathway from being a parent to permitting my children to parent me. It must be lived day by day, ritual by ritual. Life is the path of learning.

In their innocence, my children trusted and relied on me to guide them through the first few years of their lives. Therefore, in my wisdom, I will trust and rely on them to help guide me through my last years. That's the circle of love. †

Dorothy C. Snyder lives in Tennessee.