

What Aging Parents Want From Their Kids

There's a fine line between caring and controlling—but older adults and their grown children often disagree on where it is.

By: [Claire Berman](#) Mar 4, 2016

“My son and daughter-in-law have made me very self-conscious about my memory,” Elinor told me. “Whenever they catch me in a lapse like not knowing the day’s date—I mean, I know it’s a Thursday, but is it the 21st or 22nd of the month?” Whenever she has trouble finding the right word, “they exchange these long, meaningful looks.” The only thing their scrutiny accomplished, she told me, was putting her on edge when they spent time together.

As parents get older, attempts to hold on to our independence can be at odds with even the most well-intentioned “suggestions” from our children. We want to be cared *about*, but fear being cared *for*. Hence the push and pull when a well-meaning offspring steps onto our turf.

One of the scariest things to people as they age is that they don’t feel in control anymore,” says Steven Zarit, a professor of human development and family studies at Pennsylvania State University. “So if you tell your dad not to go out and shovel snow, you assume that he’ll listen. It’s the sensible thing. But his response will be to go out and shovel away ... It’s a way of holding on to a life that seems to be slipping back.” I’m constantly being assessed,” she concluded.

Not surprisingly, adult children were more likely to say their parents were acting stubborn than the parents were to see the behavior in themselves. Understanding *why* parents may be “insisting, resisting, or persisting in their ways or opinions,” the study reads, can lead to better communication. Zarit’s advice to the adult child: “Do not pick arguments. Do not make a parent feel defensive. Plant an idea, step back, and bring it up later. Be patient.”

“They’re always offering to do this, do that, and do the other thing, and it just drives me crazy,” she said. “It tells me that they think I’m not competent.” As a result, she’s stopped telling them when she really does have a problem.