

DEPENDENT ADULT CHILDREN

One of the hardest tasks for parents is to set limits with adult children who have become dependent. Rescuing your children from their problems suggests that they are not competent to make their own way (eventually). Although it may initially feel good to be needed, this can quickly become exhausting. The best way to know if you are fostering dependency is by paying attention to your own internal barometer:

- Does the closeness you once enjoyed now feel suffocating?
- Do you feel burdened, used, resentful, or burned out?
- Are you doing without material goods or free time to meet your child's demands?
- Are you afraid to say "No"?
- Does your child now demand things you once enjoyed giving—gifts or paid vacations?

FOSTERING INDEPENDENCE

Once children graduate from or quit school, it is time for them to become self-sufficient. This does not mean they have to immediately move out, but they need to be working toward this goal. Sometimes, crises occur that send children back home. This is acceptable as long as steps are taken to restore past autonomy. When grown children are not contributing their fair share to finances and household responsibilities, certain steps will motivate them toward healthy independence:¹

1. Impose household rules for curfew, telephone and TV use, and chores. Give the choice of following the rules or leaving.
2. Require working children to contribute part of their salary for room and board. If parents do not need the money, save it for the child to use for living expenses later.
3. Providing spending money should be contingent on children's efforts toward independence.
4. Set a time limit on how long children can remain at home before you pack their bags and change the locks. Stick to it!
5. If you can afford it, offer to pay the first month's rent and security deposit on an apartment.
6. Set a schedule in writing for decreasing contributions to rent until the child is fully responsible.
7. If you give financial help, pay off past debts rather than assume the never-ending task of providing living expenses.
8. You have the right to say, "I changed my mind" about a previous promise.
9. Make sure both parents are in full agreement on any financial support. Work out disagreements (with a therapist, if necessary) before presenting the child with a plan.
10. Set limits on how much time you spend helping your child resolve crises. Play dumb when your child asks for advice—"Gee I don't know. What are your ideas?"
11. Be prepared for your child to reject you. He or she will most likely come around later.
12. Attend support groups if your child has a substance abuse or emotional problem. Only give spending money to a child involved in needed treatment.

¹ Elaboration of ideas can be found in *For Mothers of Difficult Daughters* by Chamey Herst (Random House, 1988).