



The Sandwich Generation

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Recently, I was speaking with a friend and mentioned that I was part of the sandwich generation. She asked me what I meant by that. I explained that the term *sandwich generation*, which was coined by Dorothy A. Miller in 1981, refers to those who are taking care of their parents and their children, simultaneously. In fact, one out of eight Americans between the ages of 40 and 60 is both raising a child and caring for a parent. She replied, “Isn’t that what it has always been about?” I paused. *Yes. She is right*, I thought. *That is what it has always been about.*

But the truth is, family patterns and structures have changed in this country. People are living longer and are more mobile. These two factors have changed the family landscape. Before car and airline travel became so accessible, many families lived in multigenerational homes or at least within the same community. Grandparents cared for grandchildren, adult children cared for their parents, and children lived in houses with or near extended family. And there was something more: stories, recipes, dialects, and values were passed from generation to generation. Traditions were carried on.

Today changes in travel and technology mean we’re creating new ways to engage in family life, as we often balance caregiving long-distance with parenting and other daily obligations. Despite this new familial landscape, being a part of a family in meaningful ways continues to add to the richness of the lives of each generation. As you consider the ingredients of your own family sandwich—whether you live in a multigenerational home or see your extended family only occasionally—here are five ideas to help you savor the many flavors of family.

- **INTERVIEW SENIOR FAMILY MEMBERS ABOUT THEIR LIVES.** This is a wonderful way to engage family in meaningful dialogue. Younger



members will learn family history, and older members will feel valued. One way to approach this is to assign a topic to each family member and have each person prepare questions on his or her topic. Consider recording each session for an oral history project or keep written records. If available, have family members bring a family tree to each interview session and ask questions about it. Once the interviews are complete, consider creating a family book or documentary. There are many meaningful ways to record your family’s unique history.

- **CHOOSE YOUR PERSPECTIVE.** Recently, my daughters and I were supposed to go on a multigenerational family vacation. Unfortunately, my mother fractured her kneecap and needed to be in a rehab, so the trip was canceled. At that point I had a choice to make: If we did not go on a fun vacation, my children would be disappointed; if we did not see my parents, they would have to cope with the injury alone. Or, I could see this is an opportunity to help my parents and teach my children. My decision to take this last route—to visit my parents so that we could help them through this challenge—ultimately became a valuable teaching experience and

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a great vacation, as friends invited us to a sunny, fun place on the way home. By choosing to see our change of plans with a positive perspective, I was able to embrace my role of caregiver and provide a great experience for my kids.

- **TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF.** If you are not taking care of yourself adequately, you will not be able to maintain your internal resources to take care of others. Taking care of yourself can mean different things to different people. Perhaps it means watching your diet, avoiding excess sugar, and walking daily; or it could mean taking time to journal daily and going to a movie once a week. Consider what activities fill you up physically, emotionally, and spiritually and help you cope. Remember what flight attendants always say: secure your own oxygen mask first before helping others. Ask yourself, *Is my mask in place?* If the answer is no, do what is necessary to provide yourself with the essential oxygen you need to survive and provide care.

- **APPRECIATE HUMOR.** When you're caring for family—whether elderly parents or grandparents or young children—there will inevitably be periods of stress and tension. At these times keep in mind that a good laugh relieves tension and stress and makes everyone feel better. Injecting humor into the situation can provide a welcome break from seriousness and can be just what is needed to reframe a situation and get a different perspective.

- **DON'T BE AFRAID TO ASK QUESTIONS.** If you find yourself facing a major family transition—a move, a new school, an illness, or a change in caregiving roles—don't make assumptions. If there is something that you do not understand, ask for clarification. For example, if you are hiring someone to help with an aging parent, clarify the hours to be worked, responsibilities and expectations, and payment terms; if you're considering a new school for your kids, be sure to

consider all of the implications to your schedule, their activities, and all of the other family members who might be affected by the change. Discussing these things upfront will avoid difficult situations in the future.

It is both enriching and challenging to deal with aging parents and children simultaneously. Choose your perspective. Remember that you have a choice in how you approach each situation and that you are teaching your children how to engage with family each time you make a decision in your role as a caregiver. If we are to call ourselves members of the sandwich generation, let's do our best to savor the flavors of the sandwich and fill it with delicious moments we'll always remember. The memories you create in these busy, fulfilling years will be part of your family's heritage. ✿

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