

Setting Limits: Just How Much Should We Do for Our Aging Parents?

By Dale Atkins

DO Separate Needs from Wants

There's a chasm of difference between a crucial need parents may have (food, clothing, shelter, and basic kindness) and something they want (two-hour visits every day, your kids to be quiet at the table, a bigger condo in Boca Raton). One of my clients developed a stock answer when her father called from the nursing home to tell her he "needed" expensive cigars and single-malt scotch. "Dad, do you have any requests that don't require me to bring things that are bad for you?"

DO Face Your Fears

Parents' demands can trigger elemental fears- the looming specter of their mortality, the scary knowledge that a parent's decline brings us a step closer to our own old age. But only by facing fears can we defuse them and put ourselves back in control.

A client's mother was a well-known academic reaching 80 and blind. The client found herself shutting down emotionally. One night she simply came out with it: "Mom, the truth is that I'm accustomed to you being the rock in my life and I get scared that you aren't that right now." Her mother was relieved. Now she knew why her daughter had been so cold. Best of all, the admission helped the mother regain some sense of independence and personal value.

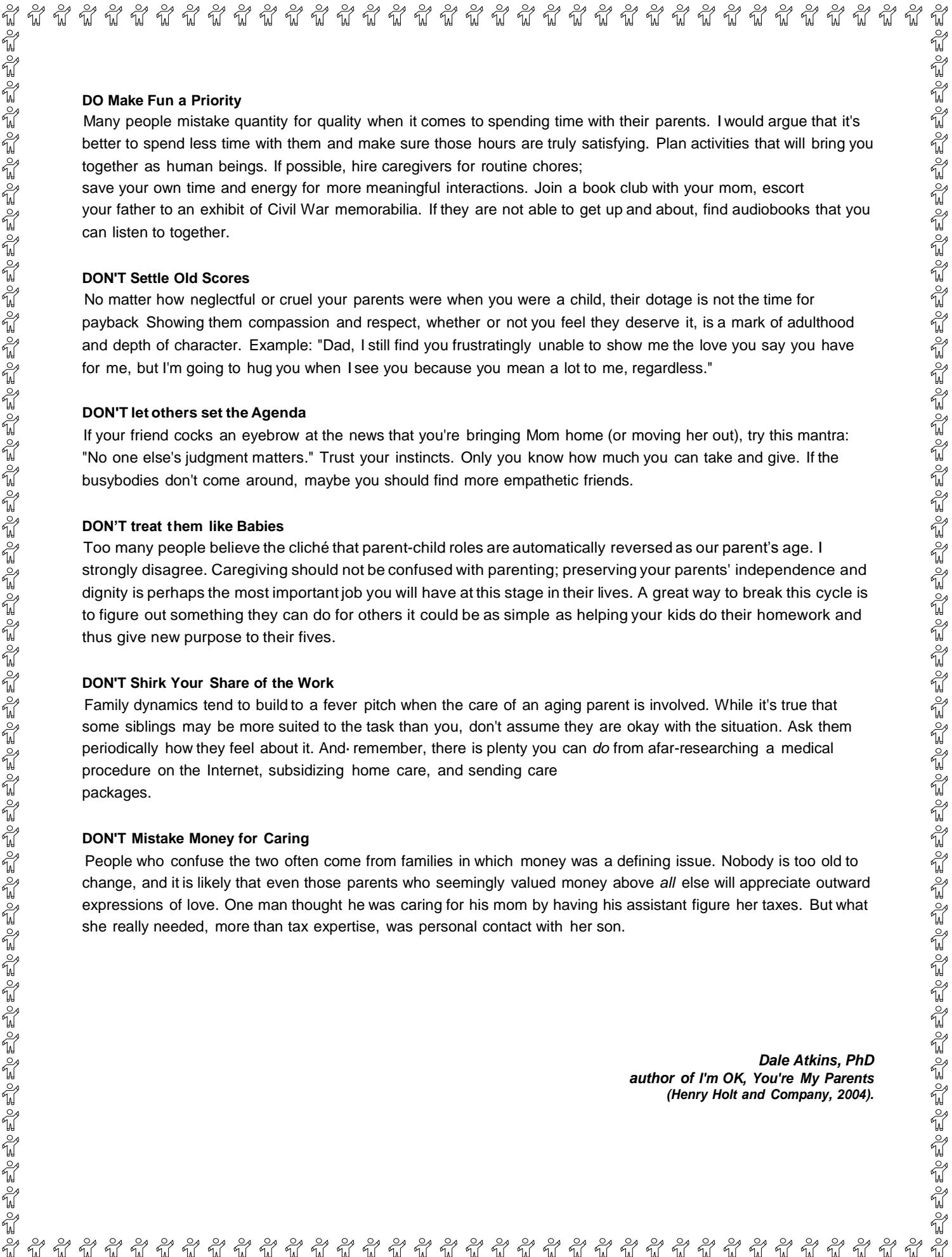
DO Pack Your "Baggage"

Often parents' demands create extreme feelings of guilt about the times we've hurt them and resentment about the times they've hurt us. Jeremy, a photographer, resented the nightly calls from his father, a retired stockbroker in his late 70s who wanted his son to know all the moves he had made that day in his own small investment portfolio.

Jeremy angrily interpreted this as distrust because he had been irresponsible until he turned 30. But as the family's therapist, I discovered that the reason the father called was simply to connect with his son. When the son realized he had misinterpreted his father's intentions, he was able to enjoy the calls.

DO Say No-but Gently

It's not easy, especially when we're faced with a request we're not prepared to argue against. It may require practice. Enlist a spouse or friend to act out a scenario in which your parents make an unreasonable demand. Write dialogue out in advance, supplying your helper with a list of your parents' usual defenses. Formulate responses to all their potential harangues. Example: "dad, I know how much your freedom and mobility mean to you, and I'll try to be as available as possible to take you places, but I cannot allow you to drive anymore."



DO Make Fun a Priority

Many people mistake quantity for quality when it comes to spending time with their parents. I would argue that it's better to spend less time with them and make sure those hours are truly satisfying. Plan activities that will bring you together as human beings. If possible, hire caregivers for routine chores; save your own time and energy for more meaningful interactions. Join a book club with your mom, escort your father to an exhibit of Civil War memorabilia. If they are not able to get up and about, find audiobooks that you can listen to together.

DON'T Settle Old Scores

No matter how neglectful or cruel your parents were when you were a child, their dotage is not the time for payback. Showing them compassion and respect, whether or not you feel they deserve it, is a mark of adulthood and depth of character. Example: "Dad, I still find you frustratingly unable to show me the love you say you have for me, but I'm going to hug you when I see you because you mean a lot to me, regardless."

DON'T let others set the Agenda

If your friend cocks an eyebrow at the news that you're bringing Mom home (or moving her out), try this mantra: "No one else's judgment matters." Trust your instincts. Only you know how much you can take and give. If the busybodies don't come around, maybe you should find more empathetic friends.

DON'T treat them like Babies

Too many people believe the cliché that parent-child roles are automatically reversed as our parent's age. I strongly disagree. Caregiving should not be confused with parenting; preserving your parents' independence and dignity is perhaps the most important job you will have at this stage in their lives. A great way to break this cycle is to figure out something they can do for others it could be as simple as helping your kids do their homework and thus give new purpose to their fives.

DON'T Shirk Your Share of the Work

Family dynamics tend to build to a fever pitch when the care of an aging parent is involved. While it's true that some siblings may be more suited to the task than you, don't assume they are okay with the situation. Ask them periodically how they feel about it. And remember, there is plenty you can do from afar-researching a medical procedure on the Internet, subsidizing home care, and sending care packages.

DON'T Mistake Money for Caring

People who confuse the two often come from families in which money was a defining issue. Nobody is too old to change, and it is likely that even those parents who seemingly valued money above *all* else will appreciate outward expressions of love. One man thought he was caring for his mom by having his assistant figure her taxes. But what she really needed, more than tax expertise, was personal contact with her son.

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author of *I'm OK, You're My Parents*
(Henry Holt and Company, 2004).*