

CAREGIVER CONNECTION

Caught Between Generations: How to Parent Your Teen While Caring for Your Parent

By Scott Grant, Certified Senior Advisor®, SHSS® Graying with Grace

Juggling the competing demands of teenage children and aging parents can leave you feeling stretched impossibly thin, wondering if you're shortchanging everyone—including yourself. With these practical strategies and permission to prioritize your wellbeing, you can navigate this challenging phase.

Did you know nearly 47% of adults in their 40s and 50s are caught in the middle of raising children while caring for aging parents?

If you've ever felt like you're constantly toggling between teenage drama and your parent's medical appointments, you're not alone—this challenging position even has a name: the sandwich generation.

But here's the surprising part... despite feeling perpetually exhausted, many people in this situation discover unexpected strengths and connections they never knew were possible.

Being stretched between these two caregiving roles can feel overwhelming, especially when both generations need your attention simultaneously. You might find yourself thinking: "I can't possibly meet everyone's needs and still take care of myself."

The truth is, you're right—trying to be everything to everyone is unsustainable. But with the right strategies, you can navigate this challenging time with more grace and less guilt.

The Parallel Universe: Teen and Elder Communication

One of the most surprising discoveries for sandwich generation caregivers is that teenagers and older adults often have remarkably similar emotional needs—though they express them very differently.

Both groups:

- Crave independence while still needing support
- Resist being talked down to or treated as incapable
- Experience significant physical and cognitive changes
- May feel their identity is being threatened
- Are navigating major life transitions

Did you know? Both teens and older adults respond better to questions that empower choice rather than directives that feel controlling.

Instead of saying "You need to take your medication" to your parent or "You need to finish your homework" to your teen, try: "Would you prefer to take your medication before or after breakfast?" or "Are you planning to work on your assignment before or after dinner?"

This simple shift acknowledges autonomy while still addressing the necessary task.

Time Management When Everyone Needs You Now

Perhaps the greatest challenge of the sandwich generation is the constant feeling that everyone needs a piece of you—often at exactly the same moment.

Creating systems that work for both generations isn't just helpful—it's essential for survival. Here's how to start:

1. Create a unified family calendar

- Use a shared digital calendar that color-codes each family member's commitments
 - Schedule "appointment blocks" for your parents rather than scattered individual appointments
 - Build in transition time between teen activities and elder care responsibilities
2. Establish priority protocols before emergencies happen
 - Distinguish between urgent and important for both generations
 - Create a "who to call first" list for different scenarios
 - Have backup plans for when you truly cannot be in two places at once
 3. Batch similar tasks across generations
 - Schedule medical appointments for family members on the same day when possible
 - Combine shopping trips to save time
 - Prepare meals that work for both teenagers and older adults (with minor modifications)

Emotional Boundaries: When You Can't Be Everything to Everyone

The emotional toll of dual caregiving can be overwhelming. You might catch yourself thinking: "Everyone needs something from me, and I have nothing left to give."

This is where boundaries become not just important but essential.

Signs you need stronger boundaries:

- You feel resentful toward both your teen and your parent
- You're canceling your own medical appointments while making everyone else's
- Small requests feel like huge impositions
- You can't remember the last time you did something solely for your enjoyment
- You're experiencing physical symptoms of stress (headaches, insomnia, etc.)

Setting boundaries sounds difficult, but start with these scripts:

For teenagers: "I'm happy to help you with your project after I've had 30 minutes to decompress."

For aging parents: "I can take you shopping on Tuesday or Thursday. Which day works better for you?"

Remember that boundaries aren't selfish—they're necessary for sustainable caregiving. Without them, you risk burnout that could leave you unable to care for anyone.

Creating Intergenerational Support Systems

One of the unexpected benefits of being sandwiched between generations is the opportunity to build meaningful connections between your teenagers and your aging parents.

Ways teens can appropriately help with grandparent care:

- Tech support and tutorials for devices
- Simple meal preparation or grocery delivery
- Companionship during activities they both enjoy
- Transportation to nearby locations (for older teens who drive)
- Reading mail or news articles aloud

Benefits to both generations:

- Teens develop empathy and perspective

- Older adults stay connected to youth culture
- Both generations feel valued for their contributions
- You get occasional relief from being the only caregiver

Crisis Prioritization: The Framework You Need Before Emergencies Happen

The most stressful moments for sandwich generation caregivers occur when both generations experience a crisis simultaneously. Having a framework in place before these moments happen can make all the difference.

Create a decision matrix by asking:

1. Which situation presents an immediate safety risk?
2. Which person has other available support right now?
3. Which situation will deteriorate faster without intervention?
4. Which need can be temporarily met by someone else?

Have emergency backup plans:

- Identify 2-3 people who can step in for teen needs
- Establish 2-3 contacts for elder care backup
- Consider paid support services for crisis situations
- Create “emergency information sheets” for both your teen and your parent
- Finding Moments for You: Micro Self-Care for the Doubly Devoted
- You’ve likely heard the airplane oxygen mask analogy before—put on your own before helping others. But when you’re caring for multiple generations, finding time for traditional self-care can seem impossible.
- This is where micro self-care becomes essential.

Realistic self-care for sandwich generation caregivers:

- 5-minute meditation while waiting for appointments
- Listening to audiobooks during commutes or while doing chores
- Setting up a weekly 20-minute video call with a supportive friend
- Creating a “no caregiving zone” (even if it’s just your bathroom)
- Scheduling “worry time” so concerns don’t consume your entire day

Remember that self-care isn’t selfish—it’s essential maintenance for the person everyone is counting on.

The Hidden Gift of the In-Between

While being caught between generations is undeniably challenging, many caregivers discover unexpected wisdom and perspective from this unique position.

You’re witnessing and supporting two major life transitions simultaneously. This gives you a rare vantage point on the full spectrum of human development—and the opportunity to build a family legacy of compassionate care.

On the hardest days, remind yourself: “This phase is temporary, but the connections we’re building will last.”

Your teenagers are watching how you care for your aging parents. Through your example, they’re learning how to navigate difficult situations with grace, how to prioritize family while maintaining boundaries, and how they might care for you someday... That might be the most important gift of all.

Upcoming Caregiver Events

CAREGIVER PONTOON RIDES

THE ADRC OF LA CROSSE COUNTY AND NORTH AMERICAN SQUIRREL ASSOCIATION (NASA) ARE SPONSORING FREE PONTOON CRUISES FOR CAREGIVERS AND CARE RECIPIENTS!

Spend a couple of hours cruising Lake Onalaska in a pontoon captained by NASA volunteers. The pontoon is wheelchair accessible and offers shade from the Bimini cover. The cruises are limited to 9 passengers (less if there are people who use wheelchairs). Please call the ADRC of La Crosse County to reserve your spot. If you would like to go on more than one cruise, please choose your preferred date and we will put you on a waiting list for the other cruises. Call 608-785-5700 to register!

June 11 1 PM to 3 PM

June 27 10 AM to 12 noon

July 9 10 AM to 12 noon

July 25 1 PM to 3 PM

August 5 10 AM to 12 noon

August 29 2 PM to 4 PM

Caregiver Education: How to Hire Caregivers for Your Home

The fourth educational opportunity will provide information on where to find volunteer and paid providers to come into your home to provide caretaking services. Other topics include background checks, interview question ideas, and creating a task list for the provider. Additionally, we will talk about funding options to assist in paying for services.

Tuesday, June 3, 2025, 1-2:30 PM

This is a FREE event!

Holmen Area Community Center 800 N. Holmen Dr. Holmen, WI 54636

Registration deadline: May 27, 2025

Questions and registration through the ADRC of La Crosse County at 608-785-5700

[/adrc@lacrossecounty.org](mailto:adrc@lacrossecounty.org)

Family Caregiver Support Group

This Support Group is open to ALL Family Caregivers! The focus will be on reducing the stress of family caregivers, not a specific diagnosis. Come and meet other family caregivers and share the caregiving journey!

Thursday, June 12, 2025, 1:30-2:30 PM (will meet ongoing the second Thursday of the month.

LOCATION: Franciscan Spirituality Center 920 Market St. La Crosse, WI 54501

Any questions?

Contact Kristine Meyer at 608-386-0922 or kmeyer@lacrossecounty.org



adrc@lacrossecounty.org
608-785-5700
www.lacrossecounty.org/ADRC

Kristine Meyer
Caregiver Support Specialist