

DISAGREEABLE DISTANT ADULT CHILDREN

It is not uncommon for tension that occurred between parents and children in the formative years to continue or to surface when young people leave home. It may take the form of daily battles or total estrangement. Twelve sources of these difficulties are listed in order from the least to the most solvable:¹

1. The child has difficulty watching parents grow older and withdraws.
2. The child is involved in substance abuse or other illicit activity.
3. The parent's and child's lifestyles, values, or beliefs clash.
4. The child is resentful of or intimidated by the parent's success or embarrassed by the parent's "lack" of accomplishment.
5. Spouses are controlling and hinder contact.
6. The parent and child disapprove of each other's spouses.
7. The child is in an alliance with other family members against the parent or competing with one parent for the other parent's love.
8. The child has difficulty interacting with many people due to feelings of entitlement, sensitivity, blame, and unrealistic expectations.
9. The parent tolerates or overlooks rude, unacceptable behavior.
10. The child is suffering from depression and chronic feelings of unhappiness.
11. The child has unresolved issues from the past.
12. The parent has annoying habits of criticizing, interrogating, offering unsolicited advice, or having unrealistic expectations.

BRIDGING THE GAP

Often, the gulf these problems create can be bridged when parents make a concerted effort. The focus needs to be away from blame, resentment, or approval and on what the parent can do to take charge and make a difference. Develop acceptance and compassion for your child's "flaws." Examine the following strategies and note the sources of the problems that they address (given in parentheses):

Making Initial Changes

- Sympathize with your child. Problem solving and advice can prolong diatribes. (8)
- Set limits on how long you listen to problems. After 20 minutes, say "I really have to go." It's okay to make up excuses. Limit the number and length of phone calls. (8, 9)
- When behavior is disruptive, state the immediate change you would like either directly or indirectly—"I'd like you to say something nice, even if you have to fake it." "Although you're very good at pointing out my flaws, you might surprise yourself and say something kind." (8, 9)
- Arrange some superficial or less intense contact. Discuss the news, movies, and books. Go on outings or complete projects together. (12)
- Revise your expectations. If your children have jobs, a place to live, significant others, interests, and no addictions, they are probably reasonably healthy adults. Expectations for more than weekly phone contact, monthly visits (if they live in town), participation in holiday events, or birthday cards may be unrealistic. (12)

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

Preparing for Meetings to Mend Tension

- Make a list of questions to get to the root of the problem—“What did I do in the past that still bothers you? Do I advise, pry, or criticize too much? Are you angry with me because . . . ? What would you like me to do differently? What are you willing to do? What do you appreciate about me?” (1, 3, 4, 8, 11, 12)
- Make a list of difficulties you have interacting with your child. Focus on what happens between you, not on his or her lifestyle. Be sure to start each statement with the word “I”—“I feel . . . when you. . . .” (7, 8, 9)
- Make a wish list of what you would like to be different—“Would you stop making fun of me, include me in conversations, not disagree with me so much . . . ?” (7, 8, 9)
- Make a list of what you appreciate or admire in your child. Reframe some dislikes as positives. An arguer can be thought of as a wonderful debater. (12)

Meetings and Encounters

- Give your child your list of questions (see above) at the end of a visit or mail them.
- Plan a meeting no later than two weeks after the child has had time to think over the list. Meet in a public place if neutral ground is needed. Plan for about two hours in person or an hour on the phone if the child lives out of town.
- Show you understand your child’s responses to your question list and validate factors that contribute to his or her feelings—“It makes sense that you feel . . . when I (used to). . . . because . . .” (1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12)
- Express remorse for any of your past actions that caused problems. If the child is willing, help him or her understand the good intentions you had. (11, 12)
- Show your appreciation list to create an atmosphere of safety. Then show your lists of issues that trouble you and requests for change. Ask the child to tell you what makes sense about your concerns or desires. (12)
- Do not push for agreement or solutions. Focus on understanding each other and leave it up to each person to consider the other’s requests. (12)

Cases of Estrangement

- Stay away long enough for your child to miss you. Allow time for the child to mature and for life to teach its lessons. (12)
- Write a reconciliation letter. Admit any of your past mistakes, express remorse for ways you might have unknowingly hurt your child, and emphasize your desire to renew your relationship. (11, 12)
- Send cards on holidays and birthdays. Send your child a card on Mother’s Day recounting fond memories. (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12)
- Plan a meeting with a counselor or mediator when damage to the relationship has been extensive. If you live out of town, state that you are coming to visit and arrange your own accommodations and transportation. (3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 11)
- Get a life! Make sure you don’t depend on your child for all your emotional needs. “Adopt” others as adult children when there is no hope of renewing your relationship.