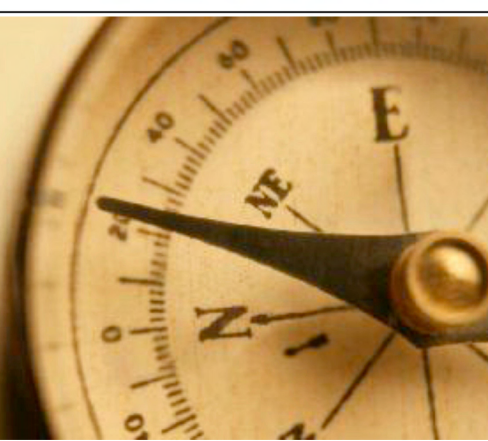


LifeMapSM



"LifeMap is a navigational tool to help you on your path towards personal and professional success. Our belief is that you can achieve a more rewarding career, a more productive organization and a more enjoyable and abundant life."

May 1, 2007

This Week's Message:

[A Sandwich To Enjoy.](#)

[Paths Forward](#)

[Resources](#)

[Have Dr. Paul speak at your next meeting or conference.](#)

Quick Links

[LifeMap Archive](#)

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A Sandwich To Enjoy.

The term " sandwich generation" has gained such currency that it has already been added to many dictionaries. This term typically refers to middle-aged people who are "sandwiched" between their child rearing responsibilities and the need to oversee or provide care for their elder parents. You've got to love how the baby boomer generation (or the "boomer" media, anyway) invents new phrases as if every challenge it faces is some brand new development in the history of mankind!

Until rather recent history, multi-generational families were the norm not the exception. There are many reasons why the pared down, so-called "nuclear" family of just parents and dependent children emerged as the basic social unit. Several of them include the societal move from the farm to the city to the suburbs, increased family mobility and relocation due to career demands, and improvement in the health and finances of the elderly which allowed them independent living options. Even so, the current estimate is that about 25% of the U.S. population are simultaneously providing care for their children and their elders and this number is expected to grow to more than 60% in the next

ten years. (An interesting point I'd like to make here is that I could find few international studies looking at this phenomenon. I'd be interested in what our non-US members of the LifeMap community think.)

What occurs to me is that there is probably no singular "sandwich generation" per se. A more accurate (and less boomer-centric) description might be "sandwich phase" which would recognize that this is not a permanent feature of any particular generation but rather, a predictable phase in anyone's life that can be prepared for thoughtfully, managed competently and enjoyed with a certain perspective. This optimistic picture does not ignore the reality that any change in lifestyle or living arrangements (for better or worse) brings stress. But when stress is recognized and addressed (be it emotional, financial or otherwise) it can be managed and reduced. Here are some ideas to help you prepare for and manage a harmonious, multi-generational household.

Paths Forward

- **Start Now.** If you or your spouse have parents, children, or any extended family members for whose care you might be responsible for then you need to start thinking and talking about the "sandwich phase" now. Answers to complex issues do not fall from the sky either quickly or fully formed. The sooner you start this conversation with all interested parties the better sense you can develop of what needs might evolve, what resources may (or may not) be available, what obstacles there might be, and what mutual expectations may exist. Start with a firm idea of what you can and cannot do; here is where a good counselor can help. Then, move the conversations outward in concentric circles from self, to spouse / partner, to children (if of age), to parents, to other family members or potential care providers. Again, a family counselor or trusted family advisor can be of great assistance in facilitating these discussions.

- **An Upside For Children.** Most of what one reads about the sandwich generation talks about it in demanding or negative terms. But what about the benefits of children getting to really know their grandparents or their great grandparents as individuals? Wisdom and practical lessons being passed down from one generation to another provide a sense of perspective and confidence that make today's troubles will seem smaller. Family history and lore provide children with a strong sense of their own heritage that cannot come from books and movies. It's also beneficial to your own long-term interest to have your kids learn how to treat elders with inclusion and respect.

- **An Upside For Elders.** Is there anything more familiar than an elder bragging about his or her grandchildren? Grandchildren who exhibit the same annoying behaviors that their parents did are frequently rewarded with a forgiving smile or perhaps the mildest reprimand. Why? Because the elder can take pleasure in the company of the child without the primary responsibility for his or her development. The antics and all-too-familiar foibles of the child can resurrect fond memories, provide essential emotional engagement, and generate physical energy and an often-missing sense of

fun for the elder.

• **Membership Isn't Free.** Household membership isn't free and this is a good thing. Elders in your household want to feel that they are contributors, not a burden. Your life can become a bit easier when chores are spread around a bit more. Older hands can help out with meal preparation, cleanup, on the babysitting front or even just waiting for the cable guy. The same goes for children. Younger hands should be taught to pitch in on age-appropriate tasks which will help them develop into fully participating members of their own households one day. The small daily acts of contributing to the household - being involved and productive - give those of any age a sense of competence and belonging that is vital to us all.

• **First Things First.** If you have a spouse or partner do not neglect this relationship in the whirl of trying to meet everyone else's needs. Multi-generational households are hotbeds of conflicting needs. In your role as the leader(s) of the sandwich phase household you will need constant support, and to get this support, you must also give it. Communicating with your partner is essential for you to both maintain the same priorities. Privacy may be hard to come by but carving out the time for it is mandatory.

• **Don't Go It Alone.** There are thousands of other folks out there right now dealing with the same questions and issues as you. There is no good reason for you to have to figure out how to manage a harmonious, multi-generational family all on your own. Many church, temple or social organizations have discussion groups that focus on just these issues. Some governmental assistance, community resources or social / elder services may be available in your area. It may take some time, effort, a little networking, research on the Web or help from your reference librarian but help and information is out there if you dig for it.

• **Know Your Limits.** If there is an elder member of your household there may well come a time when his or her health needs cannot realistically be met within the household setting. Knowing what these limits are is essential and it is best to discuss them with all involved well before the day ever arrives. This will remove some uncertainty and anxiety and may minimize the potential guilt if not necessarily the distress or pain. A corollary on knowing your limits pertains to so-called boomerang children who, after school or when starting their careers, return to Mom and Dad's house. Let us, first, be clear; the media may call them "boomerang children" but they are not children nor should they be treated as such. If they are to return to the household they should return as responsible, productive adults willing to fulfill their responsibilities to the rest of the household and not hide from adult life in some regressive form of extended adolescence.

• **This Is Only One Phase Of Your Life.** The reality of life dictates that our elders will not always be with us. If, as parents, we have done our jobs well our children will go on to establish their own households. Maybe your household will always include elders, middle-aged folks and children but for most of us the predictable tensions and squabbles of

a multi-generational household will, in time, cease. It is hard to maintain focus and perspective in the midst of chaos and conflicting needs. But as you try to keep your sandwich phase household on track try to remember that today's hassles aren't permanent but the memories you are creating are.

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