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## Through the Eyes of an Elder: Don't parent me: What aging parents want their adult children to know

By Kris Boler  
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*Through the Eyes of an Elder is a monthly column highlighting our region's older adults, their families, and caregivers. It is sponsored by the Aging in the Gorge Alliance.*

Why is it that as our parents age we decide we need to parent them? How does that make our parents feel? The overwhelming answer is: They don't like it at all. As an Older Adult Behavioral Health Specialist, I teach classes to older adults in several communities in Oregon. Across the board, older adults ask me one question: "How do I get my kids off my back?"

Our desire to help our parents is genuine and comes from the heart. But our fumbling attempts to offer this help can often come off as offensive and infantilizing. This can cause our parents to pull back, to not ask for help, and to hide potentially dangerous situations. I used to refer to this as "stubborn behavior," and it irritated me to no end. They spent their lives helping me. I'd simply like to return the favor. However, getting parents to accept help from their adult children is far from simple.





Margaret and Tony Dallman

I decided to ask my parents their thoughts on this topic. Their responses are eye-opening and I hope that we can all learn something from them. Some of you may know my parents. Perhaps my dad drove you to school on the bus or coached you in soccer, or my mom taught you ballet. My parents are Margaret and Tony Dallman and they are 88 and 89 years old.

I asked them if there was anything they needed help with but didn't want to ask for. Then I asked them why they didn't ask. My mother needs help washing the windows on the house but can't ask her children because it is "a dangerous and awful job." My dad listed several things but doesn't ask because "he has lived his life; it is now time for my kids to live their lives." They both agree that asking for help with these jobs feels like "an imposition."

As their kids, we know they need help with these things — yet they refuse every time we offer. If we push, they push back harder. Why do they do this? The answer is "independence." They don't want help to be forced on them because "they are the parents," and our continued insistence on helping makes them feel "like children."

They hate feeling like children. They don't like the role reversal even when "we know you are right."

My siblings and I spent several years strongly encouraging Margaret and Tony to sell their house and move somewhere smaller, more manageable. We very strongly encouraged. They very steadfastly refused. Finally, my dad had to spell it out for us: We were told to quit asking; their home keeps them moving, keeps them busy, keeps them alive. "This is our home and it has been for over 45 years," they told me. To my parents, moving out of their house "would be a complete loss of independence."

Why is independence so important? They agree on the answer. "What is left if I give up my independence?" Neither one of them wants to be in a position where they feel that they have to ask permission to do the things they normally do every day. They both feel that "if we stop doing things, we might not be able to do them again."

This is powerful information. Despite all our well-intentioned attempts to help, to give back to our parents, we actually end up taking away one of the things they value the most: Their independence.

I asked my parents what they would say to other people my age who want to help their parents. Their advice: "Ask your parents if they want help. Don't force your help or your opinions on your parents; it makes them feel like children." I asked them what they would say to other parents whose pesky kids want to help. They say, "Recognize your kids are doing this out of love. It is still hard to accept but just remember it comes from love."

They recommend "being politely assertive. Simply say I'd prefer not to do that." They stress, "Don't argue with each other. Work to understand what is driving the desire to help and the rejection of that help. Talk to each other even if it is uncomfortable."

For my siblings and my parents, we have found comfort in the uncomfortable. As their kids we know we could help more. We also know we could take far more away from them if we insist.

*Kris Boler, MBA, grew up in Hood River and now lives in The Dalles. Boler is an Older Adult Behavioral Health Specialist for Greater Oregon Behavioral Health ([oregonbhi.org](http://oregonbhi.org)) serving Hood River, Wasco, Sherman, Gilliam, Wheeler and Harney counties. Boler is also a member of the Aging in The Gorge Alliance.*