INTRODUCTION

Study Guide: How to Really Love Your Adult Child

“You'll always remain a parent; become a friend.”

These words from the book say it all—or almost.

This study guide is designed to enhance your own experience in reading the book, and is also conducive to discussions with another person or a small group. Because of the variety of subject matter, not all situations will pertain to you or to everyone in a group, but you'll almost certainly find something that you or someone you know can relate to.

Following this guide you'll find practical tips on leading a small group.
Introduction and Chapter 1: Getting to Know Today’s Adult Child

1. Comparing the expectations of the builder and boomer generations with today’s young adults, the authors say, “We no longer live in a society of shared values, and ideological conflict is increasing. Our basic institutions that once provided stability are under attack and struggling to survive” (p. 9). Do you agree? In what ways? or why not?

2. How have the dynamics of our culture changed over the last fifty or sixty years? Think especially of how the lives of today’s young adults are different from those of a generation or two before. As you respond, consider culture shapers such as

   • sexual mores
   • the rising rate of divorce
   • putting off of marriage
   • change in expectation of a happy marriage
   • role of women at home and in the workplace

3. How have the dynamics of our culture changed over the past few decades in these areas?

   • availability of employment
   • company loyalty (both company to employee and employee to company)
   • delay in becoming independent
   • technology
   • social media

4. On page 21, the authors say, “We parents have some expectations that are very different from those held by our adult children. What we consider to be failure or immaturity may be regarded in a completely different light by our adult children. They may see their actions as careful planning, as normal and necessary steps in achieving their goals.”

What expectations do you have of your adult child? What expectations does your adult child have of you? Would it be helpful in your situation to express these expectations to one another?
Chapter 2: When Your Adult Child Is Not Succeeding

1. When adult children are having problems, parents may naturally wonder if somehow they are to blame. Can you identify with those feelings? How can you be realistic about your own parenting? (For example, honestly deal with your shortcomings; ask forgiveness of God and, if appropriate, your child; forgive yourself; acknowledge you did a good job and your child is responsible for his or her adult choices.)

2. What are some inappropriate ways people deal with guilt and anxiety in regard to adult children? How can you move past these responses? What are some healthy ways you can react to or deal with your adult child who hasn't yet found success? Have you tried any of these? How might you implement the authors’ suggestions?

3. Understanding your adult child's point of view is easier said than done! Role play as your child and articulate their viewpoint in these areas:

   • What is the purpose of life? (Remember, you're voicing how your adult child would answer this question.)

   • Are my parents open about their own shortcomings and disappointments?

   • Are my parents reasonable about their expectations of me?

4. The authors suggest three reasons why a young adult may struggle: low self-esteem; a rebellious spirit; poor academic or emotional background (pp. 34–35). Have you noticed any of these in your adult child? How can commending a success in one area motivate her to succeed in others? Think of a practical way you can try this with your child.
Chapter 3: When the Nest Isn’t Emptying

1. This chapter focuses on older teens and young adults who haven’t yet moved out of the family home. Had you expected that your nest would be emptier by this time? What is it about your family’s circumstances that has made this not possible or delayed it? Do you regret any of these circumstances? What positives can you see in your “continuing nesting experience”?

2. The two families in the chapter, the Colliers and the Petersons, found ways to address expectations, emotions, duties, consideration, and so on. What are some of the things they discussed and dealt with? Will any of their ideas work in your family? What’s already working in your family? How might you communicate about and implement any changes you need to make?

3. The authors point out several guidelines for the empty nest (pp. 46–48). How have you put these into practice? What might you still need to work on?
   - clarify expectations
   - maintain open communication
   - balance freedom and responsibility
   - honor your moral values
   - consider your own physical and mental health
   - set time limits and goals

4. The authors take time to address the issue of anger—a powerful, natural, and often justifiable emotion. Why is it important to deal with anger in a healthy way? What attitudes might arise in your children if you don’t? The authors suggest several positive ways (see pages 51–54) we can deal with anger, especially when dealing with our adult child. Consider the importance of each of these and think of workable ways you can apply them. In addition, what can you do to forestall inappropriate responses to anger in the future?
   - take responsibility
   - remember the anger
   - keep yourself healthy
   - use self-talk
   - ask forgiveness
Chapter 4: When Your Child Moves Home

1. A “boomerang” child is one who moves back to the family home after having been independent, sometimes for practical/financial reasons, sometimes for emotional reasons. What brought Nick, Jennifer, and Rose back home? How did the parents react? What spurred the parents to seek counsel? How did each of these stories resolve? Can you identify with any of these?

2. Describe planners and strugglers. As a young adult, were you more of a planner or a struggler? What might be some positives of having an adult child who is a struggler? If you currently have a struggler in your home, what are some practical ways you can make this time a profitable one?

3. Having grandchildren move into your home brings logistical and emotional challenges. What are some of these? The family in the chapter (pp. 66–67) came up with a strategy to work through theirs. Describe their plan and comment on its effectiveness. What parts of this strategy can you implement in your situation? What resources outside the family are available to you? Your children and grandchildren may already have been in your home for some time. What steps can your family take to work toward your child’s independence?

4. When and why might an adult child just be “stuck” and not take or not want to take steps to leave home and become independent? What strategies do the authors suggest? What others can you add?
Chapter 5: Major Hurdles to Independence

In this chapter, the authors discuss four major, common hurdles toward the goal of bringing your child to maturity and independence: depression, anger and passive-aggressive behavior, substance abuse, and attention deficit disorder. They also discuss consumerism.

1. Depression can come from a number of causes (physical illness, biochemical disorder, situation), and, though 1 in 20 Americans are estimated to experience depression at some point in their life, depression is often not recognized. Does this conclusion surprise you? Depression in young adults can be mild, moderate, or severe. What are some ways each is manifested?

Specific symptoms of depression in the young adult include (pp. 77–79)

- shortened attention span
- daydreaming
- poor work performance
- boredom
- somatic (bodily) depression
- withdrawal

Have you noticed any of these symptoms in your adult child?

The authors suggest helping your adult child by 1) fostering communication and 2) recognizing the dos and don'ts of depression.

What are some ways you can practically foster communication with your depressed young adult? (pp. 80–81).

2. Review the dos and don'ts of depression on pages 81 and 8 If your own temperament makes you not generally conducive to becoming depressed, you might be surprised by some of the don'ts. Have you tended to respond in any of these ways?

3. Describe the behavior that is identified as passive-aggressive (pp. 82–83). Have you noticed this tendency in your adult child? How can you recognize it? The authors give three ways: behavior that makes no rational sense; nothing you do corrects the behavior; the behavior hurts the person manifesting it. What steps might you take at this point?

4. What are some short- and long-term effects of substance abuse? What are some difficulties of confronting an adult child you suspect of overusing or abusing alcohol or drugs (illegal, prescription, or over-the-counter)? The authors suggest three ways of helping your child: 1) seeking counsel from a professional, 2) praying, and 3) practicing “tough love.” Have you needed to apply these in the past? What happened? If you’re in a situation now where action must be taken, what do
you plan to do next?

5. ADHD (attention-deficit hyperactive disorder) has become part of our vernacular. How is this condition manifested in children (pp. 88–89)? In what ways do the symptoms sometimes persist into young adulthood? The authors suggest being treated by a professional for this disorder. Is this a step that should be taken in your family?

Consumerism may not seem as serious as the other four hurdles to independence, but it can cause both stress and practical hardships. What is the difference between consumerism and delayed gratification? If your child is in financial trouble, when and how should you help out? Is there a time to just say no?
Chapter 6: Conflicts over Lifestyle Issues

1. Recall the discussion from the introduction and chapter. Describe the factors that led many of today’s young adults to grow up assuming a variety of lifestyles is acceptable. In what ways do you feel conflicted when your adult child, who has different moral standards or who has chosen a lifestyle you can’t sanction, lives in or visits your home?

2. Our culture’s treatment of those who are homosexual has changed radically in recent years. If one of your children has announced he or she is gay, how did you react? How might such news be especially difficult for religious parents to hear? Why? Is there a difference between orientation and lifestyle? Why do the authors suggest that you “accept your child”? In what ways can you practically do this?

Even if this topic or the others in this chapter do not relate to your own child, you likely have friends, relatives, and fellow church members for whom it is very pertinent. Is this the case? Can you share the material presented here with them?

3. The practice of men and women living together apart from marriage has become far more common today than in years past. The absence of moral absolutes in our culture is reflected in this trend. If your adult child is in such an arrangement, the authors suggest several responses.

• How do your house rules come into play? How can you be gentle and firm?

• Describe the ostrich and the missile approaches when you’re in conflict with your child’s lifestyle. What is your tendency? Why is it important to be courteous to your child’s friend? Where can you gather needed support?

• Why should you seek to maintain an open dialogue? What are some issues that might be part of that ongoing dialogue? How will you know when to speak and when you’ve said enough?

4. Having your adult child make different religious choices than you have can cause fear, pain, and even guilt. Why is religion so important to many traditions? Is religion important to you? In what ways? Perhaps in the past or even now you have fallen short in following your own religious beliefs; how can you be open to your adult child about this?

• If your adult child has chosen or is considering a church or religion much different from yours, how can you keep the lines of communication open?

• What are some steps you can take if your child is involved in a cult or “toxic religion”?

• Do you agree with the authors that we are in a “global village”? In what ways? How does this affect how your child might be seeking religious truth for him- or herself? What are some healthy reactions you can employ?
Chapter 7: Becoming an In–law and Grandparent

1. The story of Jake and Jenny and how Jake’s mother, Betsey, responded illustrates several important issues that can come into play when your children get married. What were some of Jake and Jenny’s problems? Can you identify with this young couple from your experience with your spouse’s parents? How about now as a mother- or father-in-law yourself? The authors show Betsy’s wise advice: she

• took the problem seriously
• did not take sides
• waited for her child to come to her for advice
• offered a course of action that was specific and doable.

Can you apply any of these to a current situation?

Do you agree with the authors’ statement? “Wise parents do not seek to solve the problems of their married children.”

2. What do you remember about your own grandparents? If you are a grandparent, what do you enjoy about having a grandchild? Is being a grandparent different than you had anticipated? What are some things you’re doing to build or maintain a nurturing relationship? What are some memories you want your grandchild to have of you? If you are not geographically close, what are you doing/can you do to keep up an ongoing relationship?

3. Many grandparents are challenged when they have differences of opinion with how their adult child is raising their own children. What are some areas in which this could be a problem? How can you be involved without interfering?

4. If your adult child divorces, you are presented with a set of complications to deal with: your child’s feelings, your own tendency to place blame, the grandchild’s emotions. Has your adult child gone through a divorce? How can you help in a healthy way? What might some boundaries be that you should observe?

If your child remarries, new grandchildren may come into the family. The authors say, “Being a step-grandparent is not easy, and yet as such, you are in a wonderful position to help the entire family.” Perhaps in your case you are not the grandparent, but another family member, a Sunday school teacher, or you have some other relationship with a blended family. What are some practical things you can do in your situation? How do you know when to get involved and when to hold back? If you are a “step,” is it difficult for you to treat all the children in the family with equal affection and attention?

If you are in effect raising your grandchildren, what resources are available to you for help and support?
Chapter 8: Meeting Your Own Needs

1. “The most common problem in parenting your adult child is overreacting to a crisis in the child’s life” (p. 130). What crises in this chapter did Jill and Mark face? What if they had asked themselves, “What is the best way to help?” Are you dealing something now or have you in the past that you wish you had asked this question rather than overreact? How might you be prepared for a future challenge? When might your stepping in to help actually stifle your child’s maturation?

2. The authors point out that even Jesus, with all the demands on Him, often withdrew for solitude and prayer. What are some benefits of restoring your physical, emotional, and spiritual strength? Do you sometimes feel guilty for tending to your own needs when your children are facing difficulties? How do the authors address this?

3. Often self-nurture includes dealing with unresolved issues, some that may have bothered us for decades. Three ways we might do this are returning home, writing letters, considering forgiveness.

   • Describe James’s situation (pp. 135–37). What was achieved by his visit to his parents’ home by James, his parents, and his wife and children? What is this anecdote can you relate to or implement? Are you open to your adult child paying a visit like this to your home someday?

   • When and why might writing a letter be preferable to a physical visit? What can this accomplish?

   • What is forgiveness? What are some benefits of forgiveness? Is there someone you need to forgive? Is a confrontation necessary in that situation? What results when we withhold forgiveness? What do you find hard to forgive? How can you benefit yourself by working through this? How will you know when you have forgiven someone?

   Do you need to ask for forgiveness from your parents? How will you work through that process? What steps will you take? What do you hope will result?

4. Is there anything you feel you need to ask forgiveness for from your adult child? Why might this be difficult? Do you hesitate for any reason? How might you do this (in person, phone call, letter, other)? Should you involve a third party—clergy, counselor, another family member?

   What if your child does not appreciate or respond to your efforts to reconcile?

   Recommended: When “Sorry” Isn’t Enough: Making Things Right with Those You Love by Gary Chapman and Jennifer Thomas

5. Reread the last three paragraphs on page 14. Are you tempted to see things pessimistically? How can you turn this tendency around, take control, and make good choices to care for yourself as well as for your adult children?
Chapter 9: Building a Confident, Growing Relationship

1. In a few sentences, describe your relationship with your adult child. (If you have more than one and you are in a group, choose something to say about one of them so the discussion doesn’t get bogged down.)

2. In what ways do you have power to influence your child? What are some traits of confident parents? Can you describe yourself as confident?

3. The authors cite three styles of parenting they call traps.
   - Overprotection: Why might some parents fall into the overprotection trap? In what ways is it unhealthy for both the parent and child? How can this tendency be broken?
   - Undermanagement: Describe an undermanaging parent. How can this parenting trap be unhealthy for both parent and child? How can the pattern be broken?
   - Overmanagement: Describe the overmanaging parent. What are some ways a child might respond to this parenting style? What could be negative outcomes? How can a parent change from this style to a healthy one?

4. The concept of the love languages is simply that each of us has a way in which we primarily feel loved. The five love languages are described on pages 161–6. (For an interesting and interactive assessment, visit www.5lovelanguages.com. These profiles are also printed in the books of the love languages series.)

What is your primary love language? What is the love language of your adult child? How can you keep your child’s emotional tank full? What is the difference between requests and demands? between suggestions and proclamations?

How can you put some of this into practice? Determine steps you will take today.
Chapter 10: Leaving Your Child a Positive Legacy

1. We often think of money or possessions when we talk about legacy. What do you think of when you hear “legacy”? What kind of legacy did John’s parents leave him (pp. 169–70)? How did it affect his upbringing? his relationships with his siblings? his own marriage?

2. Some legacies are moral, spiritual, emotional. Describe both the positive and negative aspects of each. What kind of legacy did you receive in these areas? What kind of legacy in these areas have you tried to pass on to your own children?

3. Finances and possessions are often part of the legacy we have been given and/or will leave. Mishandling this area of life often results in resentment, misunderstanding, and unpleasant surprises. How did Ben and Joyce (pp. 178–80) plan well? What steps can you take now to handle this part of your legacy wisely?

4. Even at this point of your life—as a parent of a grown child—you are called upon to exhibit integrity and a character of quality. Why is this important? How can you do that?

If appropriate for your group, you might pray together for the legacies you’re still leaving your family members. If this is not a possibility, consider spending some time on your own to ask God to show you how you can leave the best possible legacy, in all the areas discussed, for your adult children.
Tips for leading a small group:

- Plan—decide when to meet, where, how long each session will be, and for how long your group will meet: open-ended? six weeks? (It might make a difference to those who consider joining.)

- Be flexible in your discussion. Do not feel you need to answer or even talk about every part of every question.

- Create a safe environment so participants will know anything personal they might share will remain in the group.

- Encourage participation by asking questions: “Anyone want to add to that?” “Does anyone else have a different idea?”

- Without taking too much time away from the meeting’s topic, you might solicit follow-up from the previous session. “Has anyone tried . . .? How did it go?”

- Make sure participants feel listened to; use eye contact, paraphrase, echo, restate what they say. “If I understand you correctly, you’re saying . . .”

- Try why or how questions to follow up.

- Stay on track, but if the discussion goes a different way than you expected but is still on topic and helpful, let it go. However, you don’t want the discussion to get way off the subject you’ve come to discuss!

- Don’t be afraid of silence while people are thinking; don’t jump in too quickly just to fill it.

- If you have a dominating person who feels he or she must answer every question, try calling on someone else (carefully—not everyone is comfortable with this); or go around the circle and ask everyone for a response; or say, “Thanks, John, that’s interesting; can you hold that thought and we’ll get back to you?”

- Disagreement isn’t something to avoid. Affirm participants’ ideas and experiences.

- Every honest response has value.

- Be a facilitator, not a teacher. If appropriate for your group, consider taking turns leading the discussion.

- Follow up when someone misses the session.

- Consider a break from the format and just have dinner together.