

A little book of My **BIG** Parenting Mistakes

Angelena Boden



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Angelena Boden spent 35 years as an international training and development specialist in the field of human behaviour. Today she is a novelist and uses her vast experience to address current social issues.

Her latest novel, *The Future Can't Wait* is about the breakdown in a mother and daughter relationship.

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Other books by Angelena.

The Cruelty of Lambs
The Future Can't Wait

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MY BIG PARENTING MISTAKES

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“If you love someone, set them free. If they come back, they’re yours. If they don’t they never were.” Richard Bach.

Why have I written this book?

In my new novel, *The Future Can't Wait*, I tackled issues of an over-protective mother and her relationship with her twenty-two year old daughter. Not being allowed to choose her own path, Rani, the daughter, became resentful and took drastic action to break free. This was based on a personal story around my younger daughter of the same age. I had controlled, dictated, persuaded and used every trick in the book to get her to do what I thought she should do under the guise of wanting the best for her. She rebelled and took a course of action that hurt the whole family. After much soul-searching and working on myself which took several years, I realised that I was the one at fault.

When we say we want the best for our children as they mature into adults we really mean we want the best for ourselves too. Good parenting means open and honest dialogue and that can be painful. It means supporting ideas that might jar with us. That doesn't mean agreeing or condoning but being there in the background and being happy for them. I know it's hard to swallow and I can assure you I've got indigestion from the lumps of unpalatable truths I've had to force down.

Good parenting means saying NO and not feeling bad about it. Understanding that over-indulgence as a form of emotional abuse is a tough one when we really believe we are helping our children to feel good about themselves. A healthy way of doing that is by helping them build self-esteem, strengthen their inner confidence and to love them for themselves.

It's a tough job being a parent of children. From my personal experience, the real pain comes when they are adults. We don't have a rule book because they make their own, have no desire to share it and quite right too. So on to my mistakes.

Mistake Number One: Being Controlling

My elder daughter was thirty- three when she finally blurted out what she'd been thinking for many years. *'You're too controlling.'* We were in her apartment and I made what I considered to be an innocuous comment the details of which I can't remember. Let's say it was to do with something she was wearing. When I recounted the story to a counsellor friend of mine she asked me if I be so insulting to a friend. I had to admit I wouldn't as it would be rude. She gave me a long look as if to say, *'so are you surprised she's upset?'*

What followed next was a period of estrangement as my daughter battled with her new found assertiveness and I nursed my wounds. A pathetic state of affairs you might be saying and I have to agree, yet in my defence I'd have said I acted out of concern and not a need to control. Everyone's truth is clouded by perception.

During that period of no contact, I examined my own behaviours and was left confused and hurt that I could have been so misunderstood. I didn't invade my children's privacy or micromanage their eating when they were young or even teenagers. Like most parents, I didn't want them to make some of the horrendous mistakes I did because of an over controlling father I escaped from in my late teens.

My hyper-vigilance didn't prevent them from having friends from all walks of life, going out clubbing as teenagers or using their burgeoning independence to experiment. As long as it wasn't dealing drugs, I was cool with most things. Every parent has a line that shouldn't be crossed and as a liberal minded product of the swinging sixties I was a strong believer in finding yourself as long as it wasn't with a needle in the arm in a ditch somewhere.

I dealt with my fears over their welfare by issuing detailed instructions on staying safe, having cab fares and wearing flat shoes and like most mothers I stayed awake until they were back in the nest. To me, that was proper parenting.

It was as they came into their early twenties that true feelings came out particularly around trust. Protests became more vociferous as they became, as I saw it, more secretive about their lives. Their friends that used to come and go were off the scene as soon as they hit university and I panicked that I didn't know whose circles they had joined. I was discouraged from visiting them during their studies and as a single parent I felt the separation keenly. Their growth into adulthood and the untying of the parent-child bond was almost complete but I had a desperate need to cling on.

Every waking breath had focused on my raising my children to the extent I'd made one huge error – forgotten to make a life for myself. I was desperately lonely and the mummy martyr was born. How many parents have reminded their grown children about the sacrifices made, the sleepless nights as exam results became due and in doing so send a subliminal message *I did all that for you and now you've left me.*

Letting go of our adult children is tough for most people. So many articles appear in the press about the grief experienced by mothers when their 'babies' go off to university or move away from home to live with a partner. We are talking about loss and some people have more resilience to it than others. The geographical distance does not equate to a reduction in over protective behaviour as demands, commands, questions and opinions can clog the airways in a way that would have never happened in my day. Veiled threats to cut off financial help or emotional support are a powerful form of abuse some parents resort to when they realise their power is diminishing. I don't recall doing any of this but I hold my hands up to a fair amount of guilt tripping.

I became very sick when my daughters left home. Despite the doctors telling me its origin was psychological, the symptoms were real and have long lasting consequences. Research is coming out now to show how loneliness is as damaging to health as smoking fifteen cigarettes a day. We have to accept that our children are not responsible for our health and happiness but fewer accusations and more contact would have gone long way to maintaining mental health for all of us.

I own up to being too involved in their lives, too suffocating, or as my cousin once said, '*You are holding them too close.*' My counter argument was I was trying to protect them from imaginary terrors, especially living in a large, socially complex city as Birmingham (UK) yet by doing so I had pinned down their wings and instilled my fears into them. The real truth was I was afraid for myself.

Children are quick to pick up on the anxiety of the primary caregivers and this can lead to their own future mental health problems. The cycle gets repeated when they have children. I know my father's controlling behaviours were a result of his anxiety and depression.

We raise our children for the very purpose of becoming independent, resourceful and confident in the knowledge that whatever does hit them over the back of the head won't knock them out. Helicopter parents, tiger mothers, whatever you want to call them all feel they have their children's best interests at heart and fill their days and evenings with enrichment activities designed to help them get their head above the others and to make their unique voice be heard. While motives and intentions might be honourable, it's important to recognise that controlling every aspect of a child's life and accounting for every moment can lead to an adult who lacks initiative and cannot find a creative solution to a tricky life problem.

What I have learned

- ✓ Adult children want support and encouragement to be themselves even if we had hoped for something else. It's their life not ours.
- ✓ They need space to think, to experiment and permission to make mistakes while feeling safe and loved whatever the outcome.
- ✓ To be able to ask for help without having the scornful *I told you so*, dumped on their heads.
- ✓ To be accepted as the adults they are and not the children they once were.

Mistake Number Two - Over communicating

The contact I had with my mother in the mid-seventies when I was overseas and at university was a weekly letter or a quick phone call. I never gave my parents much thought once I'd left home at eighteen to fend for myself in a bad set of circumstances. I assumed they'd carry on as before and imagined my younger brother would revel in the extra attention from my mother. Not for one moment did I imagine my mother would be so heartbroken at my and eventually my brother's departure for North America that coming to terms with it and creating a life for herself was an impossibility. In fact when she got cancer some years later, she refused treatment as she felt she had nothing to carry on for. These were her last words to me and it was too late for me to do anything about it. I carry a bit of that guilt even now. I could have made more effort to visit, call and write but... hey... I was getting on with my own life.

How that pendulum has swung. When my daughters left home ten years ago, they received an onslaught of text messages, emails and aborted phone calls from me on a daily basis. That's not to say I had replies. Apparently it was so unreasonable of me to expect a reply by return, believing they were missing me but I would get upset then angry if I'd not heard by the end of the day. How long does it take to type U OK MUM, MISS YOU XXX?

The longer the cold shouldering went on, the more emotional I became, not realising that it was the primary reason why they didn't want to make any contact. They were afraid of hearing my sadness in my voice and not knowing what to do about it. Much later they explained that they wanted to hear I was busy and happily finding a new post-mothering direction and that anything that triggered their guilt

for going off (and living their lives) was too difficult to manage. Talk about a Catch
22.

I am sharing this in the hope that it might help others parents avoid the mistakes of my misguided parenting. Guilt tripping, threatening, emotional blackmailing your adult children is the worst form of communicating we can do, yet I'm not a bad person. I don't fall into the category of the narcissistic mother. Narcissists don't bare their soul like this and admit the errors of their ways.

Over communicating includes over sharing and asking too many questions. It might have been fine when your children were teenagers and you needed to know where they were going and with whom but as adults they are not obliged to share anything with you, as frustrating and upsetting as that might be. This is particularly true regarding partners. It's not YOUR business anymore. Unsolicited advice, which I have given freely, is not wanted and even if your grown up offspring are too polite to tell you that, it will be a case of in one ear and out of the other. It's time to keep your own counsel even if it means biting the inside of your cheek until it bleeds or leaving the room until the urge to criticise, comment or complain dissipates. It's what I do now. My daughters even accused me of having Tourette's syndrome, so prone am I to blurting out whatever is in my head.

Without wanting to make more excuses, I am, by nature, communicative and by default, curious, yet I don't like it when people interrogate me about what I'm doing and the whys and wherefores of my decisions. Secretiveness in people leaves me fearful and anxious even if it is their way of fending of intrusiveness.

There's lots of advice on empty nesting websites about agreeing a time to call or Skype young adults who have left for university and are trying to carve out a new role

and identity for themselves which doesn't involve family and avoiding the over communication I've been talking about. No hard or fast rule should be applied but parents need to go with their child's preference and that means asking the question, *'When shall we catch up?'* without sounding desperate or as if nothing will get done in the meantime other than wandering into the empty bedroom for another weep.

Communication is as much about as what we don't say. Our facial expressions, especially our eyes, reveal our true emotions and while we can sound falsely bright about being fine about it all and joking about running naked through the house without fear of being walked in on, what is deep in our hearts will come out through our body language and that catch in the voice that's all too telling. I'm not a believer in locking it all down for the sake of appearances but if I could do it all again, I would implement what I have learned from my calamitous actions.

Over communicating can indicate a lack of trust in their judgements. Have you ever stopped mid-sentence thinking you sound like a nursery school teacher? *'Now don't forget to... Promise me you'll... You know what happened last time.....'*

If we have to resort to such patronising language then something has gone wrong with our parenting. I link this back to being over- protective or if you prefer controlling as discussed under the previous heading. Such exhortations are like talisman used to protect our offspring from imaginary horrors when they, for example, send you a selfie from New Zealand as they're about to bungee jump for the first time. *'Be careful darling'* is such a pointless thing to say yet we have to get it out in case they are the last words we ever do utter to *'darling'*. It's natural. It's normal. It's very annoying if you're on the receiving end.

What I have learned;-

- ✓ **Listen** more than talk. Use the 80:20 rule. Avoid commenting, questioning, exclaiming or throwing hands up in horror. No comment means just that.
- ✓ Use language for grown- ups not primary school children. Listen to yourself and watch how you are being received. Adjust quickly.
- ✓ If you can't resist sending another message via the technological airwaves, walk away or go out. Pick up the pieces of your own life. Get help to do so if you need it. Your children will thank you for it. Eventually.

Mistake Number Three - Being Over Prescriptive

My mother had no idea what A levels subjects I was doing and showed very little interest. Her ambition for me was to be a nurse like she had been but apart from expressing a few thoughts on the matter, nothing more was said. My father expected me to leave school and work for the local authority. If they were disappointed with my lack of inclination to do either, they never showed it.

After- school activities were limited to a choice of two. Piano or horse riding in my case. Neither were to help me prepare for the world of work or to show off to the neighbours. I know of children today some as young as three, exhausted by the whirl of afterschool music, maths and Mandarin that is not for pleasure but for a future CV. What happened to allowing a child to play or explore their own creativity?

There's nothing wrong with having high ambitions for your children and making sure they are exposed to as many skills and experiences as possible. Jobs are changing, declining and tech driven so it's common sense to be prepared. However most are blissfully unaware that to live vicariously through their 'little Mark's' achievements of becoming a surgeon might have caused tremendous pain and grief for their son who wanted to do nothing other than paint giant murals. Pity the poor child who has to relive the family script. One of my daughter's former friends from primary school was expected to become a dentist in line with the rest of the family. She struggled to get the grades, had several attempts at the exams and qualified at almost thirty. She lived out her mother's expectation and wasn't allowed to choreograph her own dance through life.

I was not much different with my elder daughter, insisting that the "right" school, the "right" university and mixing with the "right" people would ensure her the "right

profession which hopefully would lead to meeting the “right” man. Come on, who the devil was I to write her life’s prescription? My younger one rebelled and did exactly what she wanted to do and has been most successful at it but it caused a major rift and a parting of the ways for several years.

Many of us go through a career crisis towards the end of our twenties. A number of explanations have been given for this including the much debated “Quarter Life Crisis.” Gail Sheehy, in her book *Passages* talks about the trying twenties and the evolutionary shift in thinking and development as we approach thirty. This is where the real rebellion comes, especially against anyone who has talked us into doing things their way and accepting their world view. Relationships are firmed up or dissolved at this time while careers are cemented with more responsibility or dismantled much to the parents’ shock. The old refrain *It’s my life* comes back to haunt them.

I’ve seen lawyers crack under the pressure, accountants drink themselves to death, heard true stories of junior doctors writing suicide notes because of the pressure yet we have to ask ourselves is this coming from an external source or is it from within – a cognitive dissonance kind of reaction. An existential crisis might fuel a joke or two but the pain of it is excruciating as has played out my own family. The big life questions are no longer bandied around the table over a few bottles of wine but become the therapist’s focus of unpicking, unravelling and ultimately healing. I wonder how many young adults have spewed out their resentment of their parents while plucking one tissue after the other from the man- size box. All because of their parents’ expectations, filling every moment of their childhood with activities to enhance their chances of success which end up in tatters. At least a breakdown can lead to the breakthrough of the real person sobbing behind the mask.

This generation, the much maligned Millennials, will have to work longer, under more pressure, with a greater likelihood of mental health issues, fewer rewards and opportunities than my generation and while I am not apologising for that, I will stress that as parents we need to do less pushing for money and status and more nurturing natural talent instead of suppressing it. If your daughter wants to be a writer then help her build her ladder towards what that might look like. We all need to be realistic about what's achievable but there are many paths to success and as many visions of it as there are people. Career, marriage, 2.4 children, SUV, first home, second home blah blah is what worked in my day because it was possible. Dreams may need to be reshaped but it doesn't make them any less valid.

When we stop prescribing what we feel is right for our adult children it's amazing how things fall into place naturally even if it does take a little longer.

What I've learned

- ✓ Family scripts can be burdensome. Let your children write their own script and if it doesn't work after a while, encourage them to amend it. Life is a play after all.
- ✓ Going with the flow can help hidden talents emerge. Do you really want your son or daughter to end up with burn out or in crisis at thirty?
- ✓ If they hate their career, help them to reflect on why and how they might change things. Whatever you do, back off and don't be a fixer. That's a big hammer blow to anyone's self-esteem.

Mistake Number Four – Criticism and Judgement.

Children whatever age need their parent's approval even if they don't like their choices or decisions as they get older. It's an approval of them as people not necessarily their lifestyle or behaviours. Approval helps to create a solid sense of self-esteem and a deepening of confidence. I am sure I shall be repeating this as we go along.

Many of us don't realise when we are being critical or judgemental. Instead we are passing a comment or "*dropping something into the mix*" – like a grenade and that's because self-awareness is something we have to work on and be mindful of all the time.

Children suffer, often inwardly, from a steady diet of criticism which is "designed" to motivate them into doing better. By the time children reach maturity, these parental voices are heard like demons in their ear and they become paralysed at the thought of having to make decisions which will be deemed to be wrong. Lacking in the courage of their own convictions, adult children will mimic their parents' response to situations thus breeding prejudice, bias, judgemental attitudes and a host of behaviours which will not endear them to their peers or employers.

We all internalise criticism. My father once said I would never make anything of myself but that spurred me on to prove him wrong, We all say critical, mean things to our children which we regret even if they are cloaked in well-meaning intentions. The unexpected backlash has us retreating into much hand wringing or a counter attack of "*Don't be so sensitive!*" Whatever is started in childhood carries on into later years. Whilst we might think we have to point out flaws to trigger improvement you

have to ask yourself why this is so important. It is because of what people might say? Or because it's a reflection back on you, the parent?

Criticism, whether constructive or not, falls into the bracket of over *communication*. Remember the old adage:- *if you can't say anything nice about someone*, say nothing at all and that applies to our own families. Language which encourages, supports, nurtures and guides will produce the results you would like to see.

I made many mistakes in this area of parenting and occasionally still do even though my daughters have been left home many years. Looks, health, clothes, boyfriends came in for scrutiny and commentary. My reason was I wanted the best for them forgetting that it should be down to them wanting the best for themselves and not to please me or anyone else. A crisis in our relationship forced me to stand back and look down the telescope from the other end. It gave me some distance and cut down the over-involvement.

As in all relationships it's important to set boundaries. Getting involved in the minutiae of your adult children's lives is not healthy for either party. The less you know and see the fewer the opportunities you have to criticise and carp. So what if the living floor hasn't been vacuumed for weeks and clothes are all over the bedroom floor? What the heck are you doing in their private space anyway?

It's always tempting I know when you're paying a visit to empty the dishwasher or wipe down the tiles for the sake of feeling useful. That's all about you and your needs. I remember taking the rubbish and recycling out of my daughter's apartment when we went over for lunch. She'd gone to a lot of trouble and wanted me to relax and appreciate her fine culinary skills. All I could do is switch my eyes onto scan mode

and pick up bits of fluff from the sofa. I couldn't help myself. The action itself was perceived as a criticism and an argument ensued. Trouble was that it wasn't limited to that afternoon but to every time I'd allegedly criticised her lack of perfection. I'll say it again... it's not always about reality but perception and that in turn is the individual's reality. It's not easy to get it right especially if you've never had lessons in tightrope walking. Daughters in particular are sensitive to their mother's comments in a way that sons aren't so I've been told which makes for some very stilted conversations and tense moments.

I'm not using this as a platform to cry out about how badly I feel I've been treated because I acknowledge all the mistakes I've made in this short book. In fact I could say to any daughter who is smarting from another barb from her mother is to ask herself why she is so invested in her mother's approval anyway? Can't she accept her mother (and father) as human beings with flaws and that hands-on parent is done and dusted. Why not accept that their motives are positive and supportive and not critical. I had a lot of anxiety around my children when we were rebuilding our relationship and putting up healthy boundaries that running around with a cloth in my hand was a way of managing that anxiety. Being busy meant keeping my thoughts at bay and my mouth shut.

Both parties need to remind themselves of the good qualities in each other and when the time is right, voice them. Maybe the critical remarks are a way of connecting, albeit a negative and unhelpful one but better than cold, simmering silence.

Some mothers/parents are cruel, toxic, negative and draining and can undermine their children from the beginning. Love is lacking along with empathy, understanding and the ability to see their children as entities separate from them. If

you are a daughter or son of such a parent reading this then you will have to decide where to draw your boundaries and avoid getting sucked back in. If that means estrangement then do what's right for you.

Lessons I have learned

- ✓ Let things go. Do you really need to say anything at all? What do you get out of it? In my experience, nothing but conflict and heartache.
- ✓ Criticising will NOT change behaviour. Instead it encourages the other person to dig their heels in deeper.
- ✓ Don't take your adult children's behaviour personally. It's not a reflection of your parenting. It's about them not you. Lower your expectations and focus on the good and the reasons you love them so much. Nothing else really matters.

Mistake Number Five – Too much indulging.

The only person to indulge me as a child was my grandfather who used to slip me an old sixpence, one of which I retain to this day, on a Saturday morning as pocket money. That's the equivalent of about twelve and a half pence today but to put it into context, my friends got one penny if they were lucky. Every Christmas and birthday would bring a sack of books and toys from him for no other reason than he wanted to spoil me from time to time. My father made me go to work in our family business from the age of eleven as well as do a paper round to earn and learn the value of money.

I compare this with raising my own daughters. Running my own business in the eighties and nineties meant I missed important school events and was often too exhausted to spend time listening to their worries and problems. Guilt drove me to indulge them at the weekends with frenzied trips out, spending sprees, manic sleepovers when nobody got any sleep. Looking back that time should have been about quiet time talking over a picnic in the park or a walk by the river and providing them with more emotional support than the latest gadget. This is by far the biggest criticism they have levelled at me during crisis points in their adult life... *'you weren't really there for me.'* No mother wants to hear these words.

I once witnessed a scene in a restaurant where a family of five were glued to their smart phones and even the baby in the high chair was sucking on a plastic toy phone. Engrossed in their screens, nobody was talking and the whinging baby was ignored. It was all the more shocking when their meal was delivered and they carried on scrolling and tapping whilst picking chips from a large bowl and mindlessly cramming them into their mouths, barely pausing to look up. It provided me with a stark example of how indulging children in anything other than love and attention is

so damaging. Our children need love and approval above anything, guidance, support, encouragement on top of the basic material comforts of shelter, food, health care and that's it. Anything else is a luxury. Our role as parents is to raise our children to cope with the outside world and be capable of survival. It's not to throw money or promises of the latest iPad at them if they do well in their exams. I was told if I didn't get good grades I'd have a difficult life but that was my choice. My peers were given bicycles, albeit second hand, and had them taken away when they failed to achieve. Is that motivation,, over indulging or cruelty?

Here's another anecdote from my growing up in the sixties. A sachet of shampoo was four old pennies. If I wanted a particular brand not used by the family I had to find the money myself. I would wash my hair twice a week using half of the sachet each time. The difference between a want and a need was learned early on. Sadly I didn't reinforce this lesson in my own children as I wanted them to have the same as their peers and not to be deprived. That's a shocking admission considering their privilege.

Struggle is a good thing to experience as it teaches patience and values. The one thing I did was to make sure my daughters earned their own money from as soon as was legally possible, a legacy from my own upbringing. I supplemented that with treats to assuage my guilt at being unavailable emotionally some of the time. Children grow up but don't always mature into responsible adults. Learning to do without or save up for something is an important skill but in this age of *I want it now* we see our young adults not prepared to settle for living in a grotty bedsit or sitting on orange boxes in their first home. Through the alleged Bank of Mum and Dad (or whoever), they expect to have an outstretched hand filled and don't appreciate what it's like to go without.

Parents who can afford it pay for their adult child's rent when necessary, phone and even car. If they live at home, many don't pay anything towards the cost of their keep, insulted at the very idea of being asked. I took rent from my elder daughter while she was training then gave it back to her towards a deposit for her first house on which she lost a lot of money. It was a hard lesson in why not to keep up with a peer group but by this point I'd learned my lesson and stopped over compensating for what I deemed to be my failures as a mother.

There's no doubt we come from a place of good intentions but if we don't erect boundaries early on we set a precedent for future behaviours. Not only that, your adult son or daughter won't feel good about themselves if they feel they can't cope without your support.

Some research shows that a spoilt child may lead to an adult who disrespects authority, makes unreasonable demands and is deeply dissatisfied as nothing is ever enough.

What I have learned

- ✓ Engage with your child rather than lavish them with stuff. Simple activities like cake making, kite flying and games will help them develop internal resources.
- ✓ It's better to spend thirty minutes of real quality time with a child than a scatter gun approach of a few minutes whilst doing other tasks. No phones.
- ✓ Don't rescue your adult child by throwing your money at their problems. Help them work things out for themselves.

Mistake Number Six - Getting over involved

At one time our children ran on our schedules and that of their schools. It was simple, orderly and accepted except by all but the most rebellious. Above all it was safe. We had a rough idea of what they were doing even if we weren't in the classroom with them. I used to find it comforting knowing it was double Maths on a Tuesday morning or choir practice on Friday lunchtime. As my daughters got older, this grip on their whereabouts was challenged. "*Going to Emily's. Back late,*" used to fill me with trepidation and I would find myself texting frequently to see if everything was alright. When they got fed up with this they would turn their phones off and I'd end up yelling at a voice mail.

The fundamental role of a parent is to learn the art of letting go. It starts with watching them toddle into playschool or nursery and ends when they become an independent unit, maybe in a far flung corner of the world with families of their own. Some parents are relieved when this time comes as it's freedom for them too. Money is freed up and timetables are a thing of the past. Sounds fabulous doesn't it? A real reward after all that hard work.

Not for me. We've all got our empty nest stories filled with sadness, heartbreak and thank God moments but here's mine. I arrived back from working in Northern Ireland to find the two bedrooms stripped of all my daughters' personal stuff. One had taken up her job in London, the other had gone to university. The shock was palpable and robbed me of any functioning for weeks. As in death, the grief overwhelmed and become what is known as "complicated." I cancelled all my work and sat in my room with the curtains drawn, not answering the phone, or going out

except to the local shop when I ran out of teabags and milk. I dropped two stone in six weeks.

I recovered sufficiently to make contact with them but every call ended in an argument and me in tears. Wanting to know what they were doing, had for dinner, who'd they'd met was really a plea for them to come home at the weekend or invite me to visit them. The problem was that any visit was like torture. I couldn't relax and enjoy time with them without panicking about the time I'd have to leave and go home to an empty house.

Arguments intensified and as boyfriends came on the scene there was more incentive for them to stay out of contact. At one time I knew everything about them, their likes and dislikes but on a trip out shopping for Christmas I realised I had no idea what they were into anymore. They'd grown up and away and left me behind. Trying to recapture the closeness we shared or to engage with them in some way was impossible. They didn't want it and made it clear by going no contact.

The silent treatment is the worst form of emotional abuse we can inflict on another human being. It is a manifestation of passive-aggressive behaviour at its worst designed to let someone know they are not worth talking to. It can lead to depression in their target, anxiety and low self-esteem. You feel abandoned and invisible. No wonder so many people who are subjected to this abhorrent treatment have breakdowns. I speak from painful experience.

We become over involved in the lives of our adult children because we want to make sure they are doing things right and that means in real terms, doing things our way. We feel they can't cope without our input or because something is missing in

our own lives. As has been said once before in this mini-book, boundaries are so important and need reinforcing from time to time.

Here are some examples of how well-meaning mothers get too involved in the lives of their adult children.

- If your child has gained weight, say nothing and trust that they are aware and will deal with it. Don't offer to pay for liposuction.
- Don't offer to travel miles to their messy apartments to do five weeks of their washing. You'd be making my mistake if you did.
- Stay clear of commenting on a potential separation or divorce and don't offer to give him/her a piece of your mind. Instead ask what you can do to help.
- Don't ask for a blow by blow account of your child's day. He/she has not just come home from school but from a responsible job/university class being accountable for their time. They don't need it from you as well.
- Above all never contact their workplace/college because you feel your child (adult remember) is being bullied, overworked, undervalued or whatever you feel is wrong. It embarrasses and undermines them and makes a fool out of you.

What I have learned

- ✓ *Don't stick your nose in where it doesn't belong*
- ✓ *Getting over involved in your adult child's life will end up with them shutting you out altogether.*
- ✓ *Respect their choices and only get involved if you feel your child is at risk.*

Mistake Number Seven - Expecting too much

It's only natural to have high expectations of your adult child as you've probably invested heavily in their education and development. There is an unspoken hope that they will look after you in your dotage. Here's some news. I once allowed myself a little daydream that I would live in a cottage attached to my daughters' respective homes, being spoilt and pampered with treats and lots of lovely one to one chats to fill my days. I imagined we'd live in a cosy English village round the corner from each other and lambs would skip in the fields. Yeah right. It's not going to happen for most of us. Our offspring work harder than we did and with more pressures on them to succeed.

There's no money for granny flats or mini cruises for Mum as it's taking them all their time to keep their heads above water. It's your responsibility to provide for your senior years with anything extra being a bonus. In fact it's very likely you will be asked to help out fund the grandchildren through their studies if you are in a position to do so.

We can't compare our lives at their age to the reality of theirs as we don't live it on a day to day basis. Frustrating as it is when yet another arrangement is cancelled because your son has to work at the weekend and then drive his daughter to a dance class because his wife needs to do the weekly shop and get the vacuum fixed. We've got time on our hands to get these jobs in the week and after all we've been looking forward to a family lunch as it's been simply ages.

When we have expectations of anyone the chances of being disappointed are high so why not set the bar low to start with. Nobody is obliged to meet your expectations

for a start and while it's comforting to know that the concept of putting yourself out for someone and making sacrifices still exist in this frantic world we have to be realistic. As my Dad used to say (and he never swore) shit happens. Expect nothing and be pleasantly surprised.

Tying returns on your investment to how you feel about your children is a recipe for a mental health crisis in the making especially if this started in childhood. My girls were high flyers from an early age. Trophies, ribbons, degrees and prizes have been part of their lives since the age of five. It took some painful conversations to help them understand that my approval of them was not in fact tied to such things even though my behaviour said otherwise. But then why shouldn't we praise and applaud their achievements you might say? We should but not make them conditional on our acceptance of them simply because they're our children. Love them as they are and they will flourish in their own time.

I've witnessed some really horrendous examples in other family members with their offspring which have to my ears been tantamount to threats, usually beginning with that innocuous word *If*.

Unrealistic expectations are often tied to making a comparison with the peer group of your child both when young and adult. I'm not a Facebook fan but friends of mine have scoured pages of their daughters' former school friends to see if they're married, with children, successful in their careers, their homes, lifestyles and so on then made a mental note to chivvy their own children along the path. Others have been in need of smelling salts when told there won't be any grandchildren or wedding or their partner is gay, an anarchist or believes God is a Flying Green Jelly. Expectations are shattered and the parent is left grubbing around on the floor trying to piece the shards back together.

There's that famous poem by Kahlil Gibran *Your Children are not your children*. The line that resonates most with me is this one;- *you may strive to be like them but seek not to make them like you*. Whilst they may have some of your traits and for sure as they age these I think become more distinctive (as husbands joke with their wives... *you sound just like your mother*), they are as unique as snowflakes a term which has been misappropriated to describe weak minded Millennials at the time of writing.

We all have our limitations and our limits on what we are prepared to do, able to do and want to do. If your parents wanted you to be a famous artist/surgeon/spy and you run a successful cleaning company so what? As long as it's something you love and you do your best, you've found your niche in the world. Think back to the rows you had with your parents about your future and the despair on their faces when you turned in at four am in torn hot pants and high on something or other. You turned out alright didn't you? In one way or another. So will your adult child... one way or the other. In the way they were meant to be and not the way you wanted them to be.

What I learned

- ✓ *Trust that your child will be OK. Eventually. They are not yours to own.*
- ✓ *Expect nothing and the rest is a bonus.*
- ✓ *Everything has its time and that includes your offspring and you. It's the law of nature.*

Mistake Number Eight – Fostering Entitlement

I was one of a cohort of mothers in the eighties and nineties who held onto the myth that you can be or do anything you want to be providing you work hard enough for it. That in part is true except for the many examples of people who do work hard and seem to get overlooked for promotion or who are not given the breaks and those who appear to live a charmed life, always being in the right place at the right time.

Honest, hard work was a watchword with my own parents except that they used the word graft. Maybe this was something to do with the passion to want to help rebuild the country post-war or a left-over from the protestant work ethic. It was distasteful to talk about money but important to know that there was enough coming in to cover living expenses, a far cry from today when salaries and bonuses are something by which success is measured. The idea of being entitled to a certain salary isn't uncommon and comes in part from a childhood experience of being given too much by parents who feel that is the best way to express love and a misguided belief that it ensures a child's happiness. It doesn't. When a child gets everything it wants it feeds a sense of entitlement throughout life.

I remember one Christmas when my elder daughter was four. Toys were piled high under the tree and I was still panicking that there wasn't enough. That contrasts hugely to my own childhood Christmases when one toy, one book, some sweets, nuts and the ubiquitous satsuma was considered a good Christmas. If other relatives chose to give a gift that was a bonus and were rewarded with thank you letters within a few days. So why did I not follow my parents' example? Because I had become already overinvested in my child's happiness and believed she should enjoy the fruits of my labour.

This continued until I read a number of papers and books on how entitlement is a form of child abuse. Our role as parents is to raise children who are not constantly thinking about themselves or who come to expect rewards for every little thing, even behaving well.

Today's young adults navigate a rockier path towards complete independence than I did. With more young adults having to live at home for longer for financial reasons, it's never too late to retrain attitudes by putting in boundaries as has already been stated in this booklet. The danger comes when Adult Entitled Dependence kicks in i.e. when young adults feel entitled to be supported and aggrieved when asked to contribute. They may or may not work or study in order to move towards healthy independence. I remember talking to a mother whose eighteen year old son got a job after leaving school much to the family's relief. When his parents had to move away from the area, he gave in his notice and demanded he moved with them but as it was to a town where third generation jobless was a feature of the socio-economic structure of the place, they rightly said no.

Such young adults who fail to launch refuse to take work they feel is beneath them. They've been given messages that they are meant for high office or star-studded careers because they can twang a guitar and nothing less will do. Over sympathising with their offspring about the state of the nation may result in giving permission not to make any changes. It is only when parents say "*Enough is enough. You have three months to move out/get a job/start paying your way or you will leave,*" their lives improve. Again, how many parents who are overinvested in their child's welfare will do that?

None of us want to deal with hardships but it's a true saying that "*Necessity is the mother of invention.*" When faced with having to be proactive we find the internal resources to do so.

Raising a child to an adult with a sense of entitlement is dangerous. They find it difficult to hold down a job because of issues with authority and not being able to do things their way. Giving up too easily when things go wrong and turning back to the safety net is too easy when they know that their parents want to safeguard them in every way possible. Laws don't seem to apply to entitled adult children whatever their age if they are brought up to be princes and princesses (who do have to abide by the law of the land).

Parents who complain of hard to discipline children need to look to their own contribution. I'm not talking about those with confirmed psychological or neurological conditions, but what my parents would have identified very simply as "spoilt brats." Without drawing on too many adages, "*spare the rod and spoil the child*" has some truth in it, not that I condone physical punishment at all. Non-violent discipline is much more effective such as the removing of privileges and the refusal to give into buying whatever is demanded that month. Parents have to develop an internal resistance to strengthen their response to their children's bullying. Yet I have to admit to raising my hand to both daughters at one point in their teenage years. There was no fall -back position of Wait Until Your Father Gets Home. He'd cleared off years beforehand.

Imagine your adult child finding a partner and settling down to have children. The partner has been raised in a totally different way and selfishness is anathema to them. They learned to share, accept failure and learn from it and have a strong sense of self from their own personal achievements. How long will that last without huge

resentments kicking in and most likely destroying the relationship? Guess who will get the blame? You. Guess who will be expected to wipe the blood off the knee and kiss it better. You. Who has not modelled a give and take relationship where both parties show empathy and concern for the other and are prepared to make sacrifices? An entitled child becomes an entitled adult; ungracious, lacking in respect and appreciation for another's needs, demanding instant gratification and become cruel and obnoxious when it doesn't happen.

As I said, I realised this very early on and whilst I did tell my daughters the "world was theirs for the taking," I made sure they understood that hard, honest work, care for others, kindness and helping others along the way was critical if they wanted to feel good about themselves. Work from an early age is always a good starting point. A limited amount of money in return is given a value and considering the humanitarian fields they are now both in, it paid off. It wasn't easy nor did it come without battles which is why parents need to be tough and keep the big picture in mind.

What I have learned;

- ✓ *The behaviours of entitled children/adults are soon rejected and their lives become unhappy – the opposite of what the original goal of their parents.*
- ✓ *The aim of parenting is to help their children towards independence and to make a positive contribution in the world.*
- ✓ *Saying no is hard but the consequences of not saying it can be dire.*

Mistake Number Nine - Making love conditional.

If it's conditional, it's not love. Loving someone, especially our children, means accepting them warts and all. When we love somebody conditionally we expect them to look and act in a way that fits our expectations. What we are really saying is If you do this..... you will earn my love. No. No. We are back to approval again. Love and approval are separate issues. We also send out a message to our children reminding them that we are the author (ity) of their lives thus disempowering them. Conditional love fosters low self-regard and a continuous need for the child to please the parent to win love. This doesn't stop when the child matures and becomes independent. There is always a doubt and a feeling of guilt in the child that they will never achieve the perfection they perceive is needed to be loved. Perfectionism doesn't exist in any of us and the constant seeking it out can lead to neurotic behaviours such as obsessive-compulsive and generalised anxiety disorder. The harder we try the more disillusioned and depressed we become.

As has been stated a number times in this mini-book, as parents we want the best for our children and it can be difficult to define what is it to really love our children without putting conditions on that love. This comes back to the issues of control, judgement and criticism.

Some parents invest in their children in the way they do with the stock market. Gold is worshipped when it rises and cursed when it falls. Children are often told, *I've invested heavily in your education so it's payback time.* That's conditional love. I gave you so you have to give back to me.

I have been guilty of saying such things from time to time but usually when I felt so frustrated or angry with my daughters' behaviour. I now wish I'd curbed my tongue.

It's worth being reminded about some important points about love.

- Love doesn't have to be earned.
- Love your child for who they are not what they do.
- Love isn't dependent on good behaviour and it shouldn't be withdrawn when things go wrong.
- Loving words have to be followed through with loving acts.

So what about **Unconditional love** which I think is often understood as no matter what you do to me, I will always love you. This set up a scenario for potential abuse. Think of those parents who children have grown up to commit crime, to be abusive to their families and even their parents – the news is full of such stories- do they deserve unconditional love? You cannot love someone, not even your own children, if they continue to wilfully hurt you. This is why we are seeing parents having to adopt a tough love stance and remove their adult children from the home. Not doing so condones their behaviour and gives them permission to treat you badly. Most of us have heard a story about someone saying, *If you loved me you wouldn't do that*. Parents who are unsure of themselves will at this point give in because something is telling them that must be true.

Unconditional love really means *I will love you no matter what happens (in life). If you lose your job, your partner, your health then I will be there for you.*

Unconditional love isn't petty. If your grown up son or daughter forgets to call you at a pre-arranged time, it's not an opportunity to say, *I'm really disappointed in you*. We let many things go in the name of real love as we seek to maintain healthy relationships which deepen as time goes on.

I will take issue with one adage often bandied about: ***Love isn't having to say you're sorry.*** An apology costs nothing and shows respect for the other person's feelings, providing it's sincere. I do say sorry to my daughters when I am in the wrong and even when I am not. *I'm sorry my actions/words hurt you.* I do that because I do love them.

What I have learned:

- ✓ *I wish I could go back and do it all again*
- ✓ *I will not make the same mistakes with my grandchildren (if I have any)*
- ✓ *I am clumsy but well-meaning and I really do love my daughters unconditionally now that I understand what it really means.*

Mistake Number Ten – Too much Loving

Having talked about conditional and unconditional love it might seem odd raising this final point about loving our children too much. How can that be possible? If you reflect back on the issues I've raised, you will realise that they all constitute the phenomenon of today's parents being over-involved, over-indulging and over-controlling in the name of love. For the child/adult it means suffocation and disempowerment. Imagine being wrapped in a duvet and held very tightly every day. It feels comforting and safe at first then we put up a fight for our lives to escape.

When parents are there at the first sign of trouble, they become so enmeshed in their children's day to day lives as they see them as an extension of themselves. No boundaries. The fear of failure is more about the parents' fear than that of the child.

Over parenting is the equivalent to micro-managing in business. It leads to the inability of individuals to make decisions and deal with the consequences of their mistakes. It starts early on. Maybe with the shoelaces. Let's say a child is taught to tie their shoelaces at school. He or she is so proud of this tricky achievement they spend most of the day untying and tying them over and over. They show Mum and Dad their new 'trick.' The next morning the parents are running late so there's no time for independent shoe lace tying. Dad does them in a flash and off they go to school. Mum has a long debate about Velcro fasteners instead of laces. It doesn't take a psychologist to work out what the impact this will have on the child. It sends the message that the child is slow, stupid and shouldn't be put in charge of doing things for themselves.

Maybe modern day helicopter parents wouldn't exist if there were no mobile phones and other gadgetry to keep tabs on our children's movements. I've heard

there's an electronic tagging device like a GPS to find out where those little darlings are at any one time. I can't imagine what my father would say to that if he were here. Putting children on electronic leashes is NOT parenting. It's being a warden of an open prison. With mental health issues increasing in our young adults, surely our role is to help them *feel* secure and not *make* them secure. There's a huge difference. It's about giving them skills to get out of scrapes, solve problems by themselves and understand that being truly independent means gnawing off that last bit the umbilical cord even at the age of thirty plus.

We can be friends with our adult children and be a safety net at the last resort but we won't reach that beautiful balancing point if we don't let them go.

IN A NUTSHELL

- ✓ Show me a parent who doesn't get it wrong and I will show you a pure white crow.
- ✓ Don't beat yourself up after reading this mini-book or think of ways to beat me up.
- ✓ Learn to do yoga breathing. It's the one thing that kept me sane.
- ✓ Nothing lasts for ever – if times are tough with your adult children, it will pass (usually).
- ✓ Practise saying sorry even if you haven't done anything but be clear about why. Don't ingratiate yourself with your adult children in order to be accepted.
- ✓ Think before you saying anything at all. Use the 80:20 rule (80 is listening 20 is opening the mouth)
- ✓ Act lovingly in little ways. Expect nothing back.
- ✓ Say what you mean but don't be mean in what you say.
- ✓ Focus more on yourself as the nest empties. It's horrible, heart-breaking and depression- inducing but it's NORMAL! Reclaim that part of your life before you were a parent.

About Me.

Hello

I am an author of domestic/family fiction which focuses on the darker sides of life – abuse, break down in relationships, heartbreak and psychological trauma.

My professional years were spent in writing and delivering training programmes around the world specialising in interpersonal relationships, conflict resolution and communication. These days I offer coaching and guidance on a one to one basis and find a number of my clients present with mother-daughter problems.

Having raised two daughters myself, I can empathise with the plight of my clients and when they shed tears, so do I sometimes.

My two novels can be found on this amazon site.

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Cruelty-Lambs-Angelena-Boden/dp/191112966X>

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Future-Cant-Wait-moving-mothers-ebook/dp/B074QWVC7D>

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