

The four phases of parenthood

written by Bob Hostetler

It came as a shock. In the course of telling a story to my friend Jon, I mentioned that I had gone into my son's room to wake him up. Jon interrupted me.

"How old is Aaron?"

We both knew very well how old he was, but I told him. "Sixteen," I said.

"Why are you still getting him up in the morning?"

I had no answer. I felt like a bald man who's just been asked why he carries a comb in his pocket. Somehow, in the busyness of parenting two teenagers, my wife and I had held on to a habit that made sense when our children were preschoolers but now was far from appropriate.

That's when my wife, Robin, and I decided to give more careful attention to the different phases of parenthood and to acknowledge areas where we'd lagged behind in parenting our daughter, Aubrey, and our son, Aaron. In doing so, we not only introduced a little more sanity to our lives but also prepared them – and us – for their fast-approaching independence.

Phase One: Commander

In the first years of a child's life, a parent does everything for him. The parent functions as a benevolent dictator, telling the child who to listen to, what to eat, when to go to bed, how to perform a task.

In this phase of parenthood, the task of the loving parent is to encourage a child's growth from discipline to self-discipline. As paraphrased in *The Message*, "A refusal to correct is a refusal to love; love your children by disciplining them" (Proverbs 13:24).

During our children's early years, we repeatedly used the parenting phrase "Yes, because . . ." or "No, because . . ." We not only dictated our children's actions but also took pains to explain the reasons a certain thing was prescribed or prohibited.

Phase Two: Coach

When our children were still young, my wife began systematically imparting skills to our children. For example, she coached them in selecting and laying out their clothes for the next day and in the preparation of simple meals: cereal and juice at first, and eventually more challenging menus.

It took me awhile, but I eventually caught on. I used Aubrey and Aaron's summer break to teach them about work and wages – interviewing, hiring and even occasionally firing them from jobs around the house and garden. The idea was not only to teach but to encourage their growth from direction to *self*-direction, giving them more responsibility with each new job.

We often tried to help clarify – rather than dictate – our children's choices for them. We found ourselves repeatedly using the phrase "Would you rather do this . . . or that?" Obviously, we never tempted them to choose something wrong or foolish; the phrase was simply a tool to help them gain experience in making their own decisions. For example, we might ask, "Would you rather leave now for church and have time to talk to your friends, or leave a little later and go straight to your class?"

Phase Three: Counselor

If you haven't yet experienced it, you will soon: The day dawns for every parent when he or she is no longer the driving influence in a child's life.

In this phase of parenthood, the task of the loving parent is to encourage a child's growth from dependence to independence. This is the phase – usually in the teen years – when a child can reasonably be expected to understand what is right, just and fair.

Too many of us continue to parent our teenagers in much the same way we parented them as toddlers or grade-schoolers. When our kids begin to strain against the reins, like a horse that's eager to run, we pull back hard – as though it's wrong for them to seek independence. But that's exactly the goal of the teen years. In fact, we should encourage that drive for independence and channel it in the right direction.

The operative phrase during these years is: "That's a decision *you* can make."

When our children came to us for permission, we would often quiz them about what decision they would make if we gave them that freedom. We encouraged them to take responsibility in decision making, and they responded.

We offered suggestions and warned them about the potential consequences of poor decisions, but we tried to leave the decision up to them as often as possible.

Of course, the risk we took was that our children would make poor choices, and sometimes they did. But little by little, they became capable of finding the right course.

Phase Four: Consultant

No words adequately describe the jumble of emotions a parent experiences driving away from a child's freshman college dorm. It's frightening on so many levels. But it's less frightening if the parent has successfully navigated the first three phases.

The task of parenting isn't done at this stage; it is no longer one of proactive involvement but of patient availability. Like Solomon, who wrote, "Be wise, my son, and bring joy to my heart" (Proverbs 27: 11), the parent in this phase must hope, pray and wait.

Each phase has its own challenges, but phase four can be the most difficult because it requires letting go. For nearly two decades, the parent has been the child's commander, coach or counselor, but trying to prolong any of those roles will invite resistance and perhaps even resentment.

As we did in the other phases, we found a phrase that has helped our interactions with our children: "Let me know if I can help." It allowed us to affirm our availability while respecting our children's independence.

You'll find that the phases of parenthood aren't entirely measurable or scientific. The phases overlap each other; one phase begins long before the previous phase passes completely. And different children will demand differing degrees of flexibility in moving from one phase to the next.

But overall, we found that just a little attention to our current (and coming) phases produced a healthy perspective on our task as parents.