

# Alternative Lifestyles



“We all have to find our own way in life, but it’s hard for parents to allow children the freedom and support to do that if they choose an unfamiliar path.”

*Paula Stanley, marriage and family counselor*

**W**hat is an alternative lifestyle? In its simplest terms, it is any lifestyle that’s not the same as yours. If you have raised your child in a traditional nuclear family and he decides to remain single and adopt a child, that’s alternative. If you have always worked a nine-to-five job and your adult child becomes a freelance photographer who works all hours around the clock on a very unpredictable schedule, that’s alternative. If you have lived your life competing in the corporate rat race and your child decides to live in a spiritual commune, that’s alternative. Choosing a different political party, a different religion, or a marriage partner of a different race are all alternative lifestyle choices.

When adult children choose alternative lifestyles, it can be very difficult for parents to understand and accept these decisions. It is these decisions that make us stare down the fact that our children are separate from us. They do not exist solely to please us or repay us. They are adults with hopes, dreams, and desires that have nothing to do with us. Coming to grips with these facts is not always easy.

We all have a set of conscious or unconscious expectations and hopes for our children that can get crushed when they choose another path. But it is especially difficult to accept a child’s alternative

lifestyle if you have been an authoritarian parent. If you have raised your children to give you unquestioning obedience and have attempted to shape their behavior according to precise and absolute standards of conduct, it will be very hard now to back off and watch them make what you may view as a mistake. If your child is a parent pleaser, you may still be able to order him or her to adopt a lifestyle that pleases you, but in that case, you may end up with an unhappy adult who is unable to make important decisions independent of “daddy and mommy.” If you attempt to order an adult child who is independent minded to choose a certain lifestyle, you’ll have a battle on your hands that no one will win. In the past, you may have been able to make your kids see things your way by using psychological control tactics like domination, persuasion, manipulation, and emotional threats, but now that your child is an adult, these methods can tear a family apart.

To avoid the family battles that can erupt over alternative lifestyle choices, you’ll need to ask yourself some hard questions and be honest about the answers. For starters, ask yourself, “What do I want to happen after I talk with my child about his lifestyle decision?” Would you say, “I want him to see he’s wrong, and I want him to live the life that I think is good for him”? Of course, when it’s phrased that way, you might say, “No, that’s not what I mean.” But be honest with yourself. What is your real goal? In your heart, you probably know that you cannot tell your grown children how to live, what career path to follow, whom to marry or not marry, how much money to make, or how to nurture their spiritual life. Given those facts, again ask yourself what you want to happen when you talk to your child.

All you can realistically do is express your feelings, encourage your child at to least listen to your point of view, and work hard to keep the lines of communication open. In the end, your adult child

needs to know that you care about him and value his ability to make his own choices.

The goal of this chapter is to help you talk with your adult children so you can maintain a relationship that honors and respects them as they are, regardless of their ideological differences or lifestyle choices.

## **WHY TALK ABOUT ALTERNATIVE LIFESTYLES**

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When adult children choose a lifestyle that upsets their parents, the subject needs to be talked about in ways that will help everyone live with the decision. *Talking* does not mean yelling, crying, or ridiculing. It does not mean slamming doors, making threats, or falling into a war of silence. *Talking* means creating a safe environment where you can both state your feelings, your hopes, and your fears. It means sharing points of view with an open mind and working to find a point of agreement or understanding so you can both live in peace and maintain family ties.

When you talk to your adult children about their lifestyle choices, you open up the possibility that you may learn something. Of course, you are most comfortable in the lifestyle you have chosen for yourself (and would naturally love your children to choose also), but there are others out there that you might find interesting when you are willing to listen and learn. Talking brings an openness to your relationship with your adult child that allows both of you to learn from each other and grow with one another.

Sometimes you need to talk to your adult children about lifestyle choices because you believe they are dangerous to their mental or physical well-being. In that case, the only way you can

help your child more objectively see the problem and perhaps change course is to talk about it.

Whether you want to support a lifestyle or encourage a change in lifestyle, the consequences of not talking can be quite dramatic. It is not unheard of for an adult child who does not “respect” his or her parents by living the life they choose to be totally isolated from the family. Children have moved away and never made contact again. Some keep in touch, but the relationship is forever tense and strained. Some parents who cannot accept their children’s lifestyle become strangers to their grandchildren. Without ongoing dialogue, the situation gets worse and worse. Feelings of disappointment turn into anger and rejection. Not talking is painful for everyone. Talking in a rational, adult manner opens up the possibility for a more loving, compassionate, and respectful relationship with your adult child. Learning how to talk to one another about lifestyle differences without argument or criticism, while maintaining an attitude of honor and respect, is the first step toward building a strong and lasting relationship with your adult child. Talking helps you show that you respect the person even when you can’t respect the choice.

## **WHEN TO TALK ABOUT ALTERNATIVE LIFESTYLES**

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The decision to live an alternative lifestyle is a big one in your adult child’s life that does not necessarily call for a one-time, sit-down discussion. Your talks with your adult children should be ongoing throughout various points of the decision-making process and continue throughout a lifetime.

You should talk to your adult children:

- When they are thinking about an alternative lifestyle
- When they announce a decision about a lifestyle choice
- Over the course of your lifetime

***Talk When Your Child Is Thinking About an Alternative Lifestyle.***

Steve had always been a quiet and introspective kid, so his mother, Clara, wasn't surprised when he told her about his meditation and yoga classes. But as time went on, she realized that he was in the process of making a major lifestyle decision. It seemed that his teacher ran a spiritual community (that sounded like a cult to his mother), and Steve was thinking of subletting his apartment and moving into this community group home. He was no longer going to services at the church where he was a parishioner because "my teacher says there is no god in the heavens—only the god we each create within ourselves." Clara's first reaction was to sit her son down and do whatever she had to do to save his soul and his life. She hoped there was still time to talk some sense into him.

If your child has been dropping hints that maybe he or she will make a lifestyle choice that you might not approve of, you too will probably feel the need to talk some sense into him. Some parents try to "save" their children by doing research and sending them literature, bringing in "experts" to talk them out of their plans, and having siblings and other family and friends call to help the child make the "right" choice. Whoa! If an adult child were not sure of what to do before this barrage, he will surely choose the road less traveled once his family jumps on his back. Don't put your child in the position of having to prove he's right before he's even sure what he thinks.

Instead, you'll have more opportunity to help your child think through the choice and exert some influence if you stay away from

the “I know what’s best for you” conversation. Instead, this is the time to begin a dialogue in which you can communicate that you are interested in understanding his situation and are willing to help him think this through if he feels comfortable talking about it with you (as explained later in this chapter).

***Talk When Your Adult Child Announces a Decision About a Lifestyle Choice.*** The call came early on a Saturday morning. Trisha began meekly, “Mom, Dad. I’m calling to let you know that I’ve dropped out of college, and I’ve joined this really great band. We play every night and are making some really good money already. We’re renting an apartment, and I just love it! I know you’re not going to be happy about this, but it’s what I need to do right now.”

How do parents respond to this? Obviously, this is a life decision that they will want to talk about with their daughter—but maybe not right away. If they respond immediately, there’s a good chance they will begin to argue, threaten, or criticize. No good will come of that. At this point, the parents’ emotional reaction is bound to insult and alienate the adult child. As soon as she realizes that everything she says is going to be met with strong negativity, she will avoid telling her parents anything in the future.

A lifestyle choice that upsets you is best discussed when you are ready to talk without heightened emotions that can get in the way. If you attempt to talk when you are feeling extremely angry or even panicked, for example, it’s unlikely that you’ll be able to have a rational conversation. A lifestyle is a long-term event. Nothing will change if you wait a few days or even weeks until you feel calm enough to talk about it adult to adult. Your goal is to have a conversation that will allow both of you to share feelings, explain

motives, and talk about the future. Wait until you can do that without yelling or crying.

***Talk over a Lifetime.*** Twenty years ago, Kate, whose family is staunchly Roman Catholic, married Josh, a Jewish man. “For the first five years of our marriage,” remembers Kate, “my mother would call me before every Catholic holiday and ask if I wanted to go to mass with her. She just couldn’t get it that Josh and I were not ‘religious.’ Then we both joined a local nondenominational church, and slowly, over time, my parents, and Josh’s as well, began to accept our choice. They started asking questions about our beliefs and the services we attended. We actually talk a lot about our church now and have even enjoyed the company of our parents at several of our church functions.” It has taken a long time, but this family has learned to respect each other and interact as loving adults.

The conversations about alternative lifestyles are not a one-time event that is a big crisis. They are conversations that communicate caring, concern, and love. Over and over again, they say, “I think about you a lot. How are you today?”

## WHAT YOU SHOULD TALK ABOUT

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If your adult child chooses an alternative lifestyle that you find undesirable, of course this will be upsetting to you. But the way you express this upset has a lot to do with the kind of conversation you can have with your child on the subject and the way your relationship will grow or die. You might be able to engage in a constructive conversation with your adult child by thinking about the

conversation you would have if you were talking to a friend who told you he or she was going to make a drastic lifestyle change. In that case, you could probably be less self-centered and emotional and focus instead on your friend's decision and the reasons for it. You would ask questions that would help you better understand rather than blame. You would try to be helpful rather than judgmental. You would be able to keep your own insecurities out of the dialogue (for example, "Did I do something to deserve this?"). You might also feel an obligation to try to persuade your friend out of this decision, doing all you can to help her see all sides but realizing in the end that the decision is her decision.

Doing this isn't easy or simple, and it will not diminish the difficulty of the situation. There's no doubt that it will be difficult to have an adult conversation when your heart tells you that your adult child is acting like a five year old who needs to be sent to his room until he matures. But to have any hope of continuing a sound relationship with your adult children who choose alternative lifestyles, you'll need to try very hard to treat them as the adults they are.

### **Breaking the Ice**

When you strongly disagree with your adult child, the best approach to the initial conversations is one that is the exact opposite of what your gut may tell you. If you immediately go on the attack, or forcefully plead your case, or insist that your children listen to reason before you've heard their point of view, it's likely that they will put up their defenses and the verbal battles begin. And some adult children withdraw and tell you no more of their plans. In this situation, you're in the dark; you have no idea of what's going on and therefore no opportunity to have any influence at all.

Instead of rushing in with your own feelings and opinions, hold back and let your child do most of the talking. Good listening



skills can best break the ice on this subject and give you the information you need to have a productive adult-to-adult conversation.

Marion had been a nurse before her marriage, but once her daughter was born, she stopped working outside the home and became a full-time mother. When her daughter grew up and moved out on her own, Marion returned to work at a local hospital, where she had the wonderful experience of being present at the birth of her first grandson. But soon the joy of having her first grandchild was crushed when she learned that her daughter planned to leave the baby in day care when he turned six weeks old so she could return to work. This is breaking Marion's heart. She wants her grandchild to have a full-time mother and can't believe her daughter can hand this infant over to the care of strangers. "After all I sacrificed to give her a good home, how can she be so selfish and deny her daughter the same kind of upbringing that she had?"

The only way Marion will get an honest and open answer to this question is to tell her daughter how she feels, and then sit back and listen. Even when we're sure we know why our children are making certain lifestyle decisions (assumed selfishness, in this case), it's worth the effort to hold back and let the adult child do the talking. This takes listening skills that admittedly are not always easy to use.

It is difficult to be a good listener when your adult children are saying things you don't want to hear. You're anxious to jump in and set them straight. You want them to know how you feel about this before they get the idea that you approve. But one of the most effective communication strategies you can use when talking about alternative lifestyles is one that lets your adult children initially do most of the talking. If you can hold your tongue, you send the message, "I care about what you are saying. I think your words have value. I

want to understand you.” When your adult children believe you care, they’ll be more inclined to open up and share their feelings and beliefs. We in turn are drawn into this honest discussion. Even in this time of differing opinions, this can’t help but create better and healthier relationships.

Good listening skills will also improve your ability to persuade, motivate, influence, and connect with your adult children. Every time you go into a conversation about their choice of lifestyle looking to do all the talking and quickly convincing them of your viewpoint, you’ll both end up feeling dissatisfied with that conversation. But if you can learn to hold back a bit and work harder at listening to your child and ask questions that will draw him or her out, the conversation will give you the information you’re after without resorting to a shouting match.

When you listen to your child’s plans, you say loud and clear (without even speaking) that you’re interested and you want to understand and know more. This attitude will help the two of you build a relationship of mutual respect that acknowledges an opposing opinion, takes it into consideration, and makes a decision with all facts and feelings in mind.

To be a good listener, you’ll need to practice some active listening skills. Following are a few that can get you started:

***Be Open-Minded.*** When you’re close-minded, you just can’t hear anything that doesn’t agree with your beliefs. There’s little need to listen when you already know it all or have a strong prejudice or bias toward the subject. But when you allow yourself to be more open and say, “Okay, I might be able to take something useful from this conversation,” then you’ll be able to listen with interest. This frame of mind allows you to be mentally curious rather than intellectually and emotionally shut down.



*Instead of saying*, “I know what you’re going to say, and I have to tell you that you’re wrong about this.”

*You might say*, “If you give me more information, maybe I’ll find that I need to rethink my opinion.”

*You might say*, “Teach me. I want to know.”

*You might say*, “That’s a good point. I never thought about that.”

**Be Patient.** Active listening means letting another person fully explain a thought, even a negative one, before responding. This isn’t easy to do. It’s hard to hold back and let another person finish a story or make a point that you emphatically disagree with—but that’s exactly what you have to do. Focus on what your child is saying rather than jumping ahead and anticipating what you think is going to be said. Turn yourself down and wait: don’t interrupt, don’t finish her sentences, and don’t push ahead in the direction you want the conversation to go.

*Instead of saying*, “Wait right there. That just isn’t true. I don’t know how you can say that.”

*You might say*, “Go on. Tell me more.”

*You might say*, “I want to hear your point of view on this.”

*You might say*, “I’m not sure I agree with you, but tell me more about this.”

**Be Positive.** We seem to be programmed to defend ourselves against even the slightest negative or critical comment. You’ll undoubtedly have trouble listening after your adult child says, “You don’t know what you’re talking about!” or, “You have no idea how I feel.” You’ll be able to keep the conversation going after you’ve been “attacked” only if you can put aside the defensive mind-set that makes you want to fire back, “*You’re wrong!*” Where can the conversation

constructively go from there? Rather than throw out a defensive block, it's far better to ask for clarification and listen some more.

*Instead of saying, "You're wrong!"*

*You might say, "Why do you say that?"*

*You might say, "Help me to understand better."*

*You might say, "I'll take what you've said into consideration."*

This kind of response doesn't mean you agree with your child; it just means that you acknowledge that you have heard what she said. This is a major accomplishment.

**Clarify.** A powerful listening skill is the habit of clarifying information by using the techniques of paraphrasing and asking questions. Sometimes before you respond, it's a good idea to make sure that what you're hearing is what is really being said.

*You might say, "So what you're saying is . . ."*

*You might say, "Did you say this is not a cult?"*

*You might say, "What did you mean when you said . . .?"*

**Consider the Adult Child's Point of View.** When you're conversing, there is a tremendous difference between hearing something from your own point of view and hearing it from the speaker's point of view. What feelings are behind your child's words? What experiences have brought him to choose this lifestyle? When you try to understand from your child's point of view, you are acknowledging that there may be another side of the story, another way of looking at the world. You have to consider that just because something does not support the established family value system does not mean it is wrong.



*Instead of saying, “What were you thinking? That’s the dumbest thing I ever heard!”*

*You might say, “Why do you think this is a good idea?”*

This response lets your child talk and explain his or her point of view and feelings. You may still disagree, but at least you’ll have the information you need to help you see all sides, and you’ll have time to formulate a more tempered response.

**Use Verbal Prompts.** As you listen, your facial expressions and the sounds you make can signal your feelings sometimes better than your words do. If you roll your eyes, exhale heavily, look at the floor, click your tongue, or shake your head while your child is talking, you’ll cut short any meaningful conversation that might have taken place. But if you instead use facial expressions and verbal prompts to show you are engaged in the conversation and are following along, you’ll encourage your child to keep talking. Try to use good eye contact, and lean forward toward your child. Nod your head to show understanding. Occasionally, use encouragers like, “Really?” “Hmmm,” or “Is that so?” These send the message that you are truly interested in what is being said and want to know more. If you can do this, you’ll find that your children will be more willing to open up and share their beliefs and feelings with you.

### **Addressing Specific Issues**

You may have a million questions you want to ask your adult child about this alternative lifestyle idea. How will you support yourself? Whose idea was this? Where will you live? What about your job? And so on. But asking these questions right off the bat puts you on unsteady terrain. At first, you will be feeling a mix of negative

emotions, and your adult child is going to be defensive right from the start. So before you get into the details, take some time to step back. Use these tactics to diffuse some of the tension so you can have productive conversations:

- Take time to think.
- Identify your emotions and talk in “I” statements.
- Be curious, not demanding.
- Talk about consequences.
- Agree to disagree.

**Take Time to Think.** When you first hear of your adult child’s decision to lead an alternative lifestyle, Rule No. 1 is to bite your tongue. The first words out of your mouth can set the tone for all further conversations, and your first reaction is more than likely to be a negative one: “Have you gone mad?” “You must be out of your mind!” “I knew those friends of yours were no good.” In fact, these kinds of reactions are what your child is expecting, and she will have set up her defenses against an authoritarian response that tells her what she should and shouldn’t do. Surprise her, and set the stage for an adult conversation where each person can express what’s important to him or her but still have room to make personal decisions:

*Instead of saying,* “I can’t believe you’re doing this.”

*You might say,* “I’m not sure I understand. Tell me more about it.”

*Instead of saying,* “You’re crazy.”

*You might say,* “This is unexpected. I need time to think about this.”

Don’t even try to give words to your feelings right away. The best thing you can do for your relationship with your child is to say that you need time to mull this over. During this time, you can do some soul searching to find out how you really feel and why. This



understanding will help you talk without ranting during your next conversations.

***Identify Your Emotions and Talk in “I” Statements.*** When you talk to your adult children about your feelings, own those feelings. Saying, “I feel concerned,” is very different and sets up a different communication dynamic than saying, “You’re wrong.”

Before you form your “I” statements, take time to think about how you feel. When children choose alternative lifestyles, there is usually a whole mix of feelings involved that need to be identified and talked about. This was certainly the case for Jim.

Jim had spent his life climbing the corporate ladder and amassing great wealth. He sent his son to the best private schools and made sure he went to an Ivy League college. As graduation approached, Jim talked to a few well-placed colleagues about bringing his son into the firm, and he began to gather information about graduate schools. His son, however, had other plans. He skipped his college graduation ceremony and headed south to join an artist’s colony and raise herbs. Naturally, Jim was astounded. Sure, he knew his son liked to paint some pictures, and he had planted a great vegetable garden in the back yard every year since he was a little kid, but to make a living out of that? To Jim, this was just a ridiculous, foolish, and immature decision.

Before Jim sits down to talk to his son, he needs to know what it is that bothers him so much. Is he angry? Confused? Worried? Embarrassed? Disappointed? Guilty? Maybe a combination of all of these? Take a look at the possible ways Jim can talk to his son about his feelings by rethinking his gut reactions and turning them into “I” statements. (The son’s responses that are given are ideal reactions, but they give you an idea of how “I” statements allow dialogue

to continue rather than the slam-the-door-shut style so often used in these situations.)

If Jim feels angry:

*Instead of saying*, “You’re throwing all your education right down the toilet.”

*He might say*, “I feel angry because it seems that all your education is going to waste.”

This gives Jim’s son a chance to understand his father’s point of view and respond in a way that will help his father see another side to the story.

*Jim’s son may say*, “Dad, I have a degree in business that I will need to make this struggling artists’ group successful. They need me to set it up as a real business, set achievable business goals, and create a realistic marketing plan. I think I can create an Internet sales and marketing plan that will really get this enterprise off the ground. Thanks to my education, I really think I can do this.”

If Jim feels confused:

*Instead of saying*, “I can’t believe you can turn your back on the opportunity to work for a reputable company with a great future!”

*He might say*, “I feel confused by your decision to work in an area with an uncertain future instead of with my firm, where you know for sure that you can make a very good living.”

This response tells Jim’s son that his father needs more information about his sense of ambition and achievement.

*Jim’s son may say*, “It’s exactly because this is a business challenge that I want to do it. I want to know that I can take a struggling business that I love and turn it into something successful.”





If Jim feels worried:

*Instead of saying*, “You’ll never be able to make a living out of this.”  
*He might say*, “I’m concerned that you won’t have enough money to live on.”

This response tells Jim’s son that he cares about him and wants the best for him.

*The son may say*, “I’m concerned about that too, but I’m willing to take that risk. I’m going to apply for a small business loan to get us off the ground, and then I’m going to work hard to make sure we don’t default on the loan. If it fails, at least I tried, and that’s what’s important to me right now. I know I have my degree to fall back on and can get a corporate job if I need to, but first I need to give this a try.”

If Jim feels embarrassed:

*Instead of saying*, “You’re such an embarrassment! What will I tell my colleagues?”

*He might say*, “I have to admit that I feel embarrassed about telling my colleagues you’re not going to work for the firm.”

This response tells Jim’s son that his father is being honest about his feelings and admits that the problem is his own, not his son’s.

*The son may say*, “I’m sorry if I’ve caused you embarrassment. Why don’t you just say that I’ve decided I’d like to make my own way in the business world?”

If Jim feels disappointment:

*Instead of saying*, “I had such high hopes for you. Now you’re nothing but a big disappointment to me.”

*He might say,* “I can’t help but feel disappointed. I know you would be an asset to our company, and I guess I had my heart set on helping you establish yourself in the business.”

*The son may say,* “I’m glad that you think so highly of me, and I’m sorry if I’ve let you down. But I plan to make you proud by turning this venture into a business success.”

This is the power of “I” statements. They share your own feelings without putting the person you’re talking to on the defensive. Before you talk, take time to find the reason behind your feelings, and then consider how you can explain that to your adult child in an honest and calm way.

***Be Curious, Not Demanding.*** One important goal of having conversations with your adult child about lifestyle is to gain information. But if you begin with the third-degree style of questioning, you’ll find yourself quickly shut out of the conversation. Instead, show your adult children that you want to understand by presenting an attitude of curiosity.

*Instead of saying,* “Are you going to be able to pay your bills?”

*You might say,* “Can you explain to me how this works financially?”

*Instead of saying,* “This is an immature and just plain stupid decision.”

*You might say,* “I’m not sure I understand what’s in this for you. Can you explain to me the upside of this?”

*Instead of saying,* “I think you’re making a mistake.”

*You might say,* “I’m not sure I agree with you, but I’d like to understand you. Can you tell me more?”

When it comes to your adult child’s thoughts, feelings, and needs, you really don’t know it all. Be open and curious so you can get all the facts.



**Talk About Consequences.** When you've listened to your adult children's point of view and have a good idea of how they feel and why they've made this decision, then it's time to talk about the consequences of this decision and how you will relate to each other if, in the end, you don't share the same opinion.

Your adult children are going to live their lives the way that makes the most sense to them, but that doesn't mean they can't use some help. Your conversations with them can help them think things through and explore possible outcomes. In the excitement of a new venture, we all need an objective voice to help us see the reality of our plans. The key is to do this without being judgmental. One way is to avoid close-ended questions that require only yes or no answers. Instead, use a series of open-ended questions that ask your child to think and explain:

*Instead of saying,* "Have you thought this through?"

*You might say,* "Where do you see yourself a year from now?"

*Instead of saying,* "Do you know what you're getting in to?"

*You might say,* "Have you talked to others who have done this? What is their experience?"

*Instead of saying,* "Can you understand why I would think this isn't going to work?"

*You might say,* "I don't understand how this is going to work out. Can you explain how this decision is good for you?"

*Instead of saying,* "Do you expect to come crawling back to me when this whole thing falls apart?"

*You might say,* "What will you do if you find that this isn't exactly what you thought it would be?"

These kinds of questions help another person think out loud. They bring up points for consideration and exploration without

being judgmental or accusatory. These kinds of questions will help you talk to your adult children without telling them what to do.

***Agree to Disagree.*** It is possible that you will never understand or approve of your adult child's lifestyle choice. How will you handle that? Again, this depends on your goal. If it is very important to you that your adult child does what you say, then you may break off all communication until he does what you want. If it is very important to you that your adult child learn this life lesson the hard way, then you may withdraw all help and support until she falls on her face. Or it may be important to you that your child knows you disapprove of the lifestyle but still love him. If this is the case, then all you need to do is say so.

*You might say,* "I don't agree with the way you're living your life, but I still respect you as a person and respect your right to make your own decisions."

The important thing at this juncture is to focus on your child's positive qualities and on the love that you feel for her. This is a way of supporting your adult child without supporting her ideas and opinions:

*You might say,* "You are a very spiritual and creative person, and I have always admired that in you."

*You might say,* "You are an intelligent person. I'm sure you've thought this through and feel this is best for you."

*You might say,* "You have a lot of enthusiasm and energy to offer the world. I love you for that."

When you agree to disagree, you put this subject behind you. You are then free to talk about other topics and other aspects of your lives. You both respect the decision that has been made and move

on to building a strong parent-child relationship that does not hinge on this one aspect of life. You can finally recognize that just because something is different, that doesn't make it bad—unless, of course, your child has fallen into a clearly dangerous situation.

### **Dangerous Situations**

Some alternative lifestyles can be viewed as dangerous to one's health and well-being, especially so-called cults. If you suspect your adult child has joined a cult, naturally you worry that he has joined a group similar to the most infamous cults—the Heaven's Gate extraterrestrial cult (which in 1997 ordered the mass suicide of thirty-nine of its members), the People's Temple group led by Jim Jones (which staged the notorious mass murder-suicides), and David Koresh's Branch Davidians (who met a fiery death in Waco, Texas)—that grab headlines and shock us. But the majority of "cults" are harmless groups focused on an appealing life philosophy. There are neo-Christian religious cults; Hindu and Eastern religious cults; occult witchcraft and satanic cults; mystical cults; Zen and other Sino-Japanese philosophical-mystical cults; racial cults; flying saucer and outer space cults; psychological or psychotherapeutic cults; political cults; and self-help, self-improvement, and lifestyle systems cults. If your adult child decides to join such a group, you will need to meet this challenge to your own beliefs with lots of patience, active listening, love—and the ability to gauge when the group poses a real danger and intervention is required.

Like most other lifestyle choices adult children make, it is unlikely that a parent can force his or her own morals and beliefs on the adult child. Experts have found that it is usually far better to find out about this lifestyle in a way that communicates respect for his right to choose his own life. This will have a direct influence on the quality of information you receive. Be direct and clear about

your interest. Explain that you'd feel much better if you had a better understanding of the life he wants to lead. Ask him to tell you about some of the other members of the group. Ask him to explain the group's philosophy and how he feels about that philosophy. Ask about his health and his general satisfaction with his life path. If you can ask without showing signs of subtle criticism or anger, you'll find that your adult child is anxious to help you understand his choice.

In *When Sons and Daughters Choose Alternative Lifestyles*, Marianna Caplan reminds us, "When going through the sometimes painful cycle of adjusting to new circumstances, which your adult child's choices are demanding of you, it is easy to feel victimized by the onslaught of feelings and reactions you may be experiencing at this time. It is important to remember that your son's or daughter's choice to lead an alternative lifestyle is not about you, it is about him or her. This choice is his attempt to find a way of life that expresses his need for meaning and fulfillment, not an attempt to bring unnecessary pain to your life."

When you talk to your adult child about her lifestyle, keep these tips in mind. They will help you have meaningful conversations that do not dissolve into screaming matches in which no one wins:

- Do not attack the group. Avoid name calling and emphasis on the word *cult*. This approach can be counterproductive if your child is just beginning to be swayed by the group's propaganda, which can include impressive, high-sounding philosophies and goals.
- Remain open-minded, and avoid rigid positions. Views that may sound heretical are not necessarily destructive.
- Discuss the situation in a sincere, respectful, nonjudgmental, and consistent manner. If you cry or attack, your child will

shut down, and you'll have no chance of staying involved in her life.

- Without being deceitful or underhanded, find out as much as you can about the group so that you can discuss it intelligently. See if you can get the group's own literature to learn from, or call the American Family Foundation listed in the Resources section at the end of this chapter. It has information on some specific groups.

Although you may not like the fact that your adult child has taken up with some kind of religious, psychotherapeutic, or lifestyle group, in most cases the choice is not dangerous to your child's well-being. But in some cases, there is reason for real concern and sometimes more forceful action. You should consider intervention if your child's group matches the following description of dangerous cults:

- The cult is a group that violates the rights of its members, harms them through abusive techniques of mind control, and distinguishes itself from a normal social or religious group by subjecting its members to physical, mental, or financial deprivation or deception to keep them in the group.
- The cult members have banded together under a charismatic leader.
- The group leaders use deceptive tactics in their indoctrination process, including trance induction, prolonged chanting, detailed interrogations, long lectures, long sermons, or exhausting work routines, in order to suppress doubts and enforce compliance.
- The cult wants its members to give money, work for free, beg, and recruit new members.
- The cult requires mindless devotion that severs ties with family and friends, creates total dependence on the group for

identity, and imposes high exit costs by creating phobias of harm, failure, and personal isolation.

If your adult child has joined this kind of cult, you may choose to step in and try to “save” her, but you will need professional help. Your child needs a therapist who is trained in the process of mind control and brainwashing and has knowledge of the specific content of the group to which your child belongs so as to identify the language system, buzzwords, philosophical teachings, specific types of behavioral control used, and the demands to which your adult child has been subjected.

If you cannot convince your child to meet with a trained therapist, you might consider a process called deprogramming. Deprogrammers are agents of force hired by parents to rescue their children. The deprogrammer will “kidnap” the child and isolate him or her in order to deprogram the effects of brainwashing. This is a highly controversial method and has landed many families in court on legal charges, but it is an option. Even after deprogramming, it may be difficult to keep your child from returning to the cult. Your words of love and encouragement are no match for the cult’s psychological tactics. Get professional help by calling the American Family Foundation. Staff will refer you to a therapist in your area trained in exit counseling.

## **IN THE END**

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When your children choose an alternative lifestyle, you have choices to make. You can create a relationship that is filled with resentment and tension; you can completely alienate your child; or you can keep an open mind, respect his or her adulthood, and



emerge with a deeper understanding and stronger relationship as a result. The choice you make will be conveyed in the way you talk to your adult children.

## RESOURCES

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American Family Foundation  
(914) 533-5420; [www.csj.org](http://www.csj.org).

## EXPERT HELP

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This chapter has been written with the expert help of marriage and family therapist Paula Stanley, Ph.D., an associate professor in the Counselor Education Department at Radford University in Virginia. She has written numerous articles in professional journals, including “The Tie That Blinds: Understanding Intergenerational Conflict Within a Moral Development Framework,” *Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families* (1998). She is the coauthor, with William Watson Purkey, of *The Inviting School Treasury: 1001 Ways to Invite School Success* (Brookfield Printing, 1997) and *Invitational Teaching, Learning, and Living* (National Education Association, 1991).

