

# Op/Ed

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## AGING ISSUES

# Boomers Get Caught in Parent Trap

**Y**ou hit your favorite Starbucks on the way to work and overhear a couple of boomer-age women talking about parenting issues. But instead of complaining about their own children, they are talking about their senior parents, who are treating these fiftysomethings as if they are still children themselves.



**MATT THORNHILL**

It's a scene played out in far too many homes — and coffee shops. Sure, millions of boomers today find themselves in their 50s and 60s becoming “empty nesters,” with the children leaving for college and beyond. But many are also in a “parent trap” with their elderly parents — that is, still trapped in a parent-child relationship.

And that relationship means sitting down with those parents to talk about difficult aging issues. It's enough to make a boomer speechless.

It is already hard for a 53-year-old daughter to talk to her 82-year-old father about taking away his car keys after he drives through a stop sign or hits the mailbox. And how should brothers and sisters broach the topic of in-home help to parents who are not managing on their own very well? How can you ask your parents about their wills, insurance policies, or long-term

care insurance and not sound like you're measuring them for an inheritance? Even in families with open lines of communications, these issues can be challenging. Most of the time, the easiest thing to do is to not talk at all.

That is, until a crisis occurs.

**WE KNOW** boomers can and do take control when Mom falls and breaks a hip, or Dad needs knee surgery. Discussions at those times about roles, though, are fraught with emotions and feelings on both sides — parents and adult children. In reality, when a crisis hits is probably the worst time to have “the talk.” Oftentimes, the adult child starts to treat the senior parent as a child. Not generally a good thing to do.

It could be worse if the crisis results in an aging parent who can no longer communicate. Finding the long-term care policy then could prove impossible.

I only recently got smart about this when my brothers and sister and I went through a 22-month losing battle with my mother and cancer. In fact, half the boomers at our firm are dealing with aging parents and the parent/child role. Plus, we hear stories from boomers across the country who are still struggling with it. The goal isn't to reverse roles, but to realign them and treat each other as adults. It is definitely a new phase for boomers, one

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they didn't think they'd have to go through after age 50.

The numbers, according to the Census Bureau, are surprising. In 1970, only 13 percent of people 60 years old still had a parent alive. In 2006, that figure was 49 percent. With modern medical miracles occurring daily, we expect that percentage will continue to increase. Which means adult boomer children with still-living parents need to find a way past the parent trap sooner rather than later.

**ONE COMPANY** that also recently got smarter about this issue is the largest organization in non-medical in-home care services, Home Instead Senior Care. Based in Omaha, it operates through franchises in markets across the United States, Canada, Europe, and Asia. A year ago it conducted a research study among boomers who are the adult children of aging seniors. The organization asked us to dig through the results to see if we could find anything that made it easier for these boomers to talk with their parents about aging issues.

We discovered that nearly one-third of boomer adults in the U.S. have a ma-



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major communication obstacle with their parents that is rooted in the continuation of the parent-child role. Many seniors may still be dealing with their grown sons or daughters as if they're children rather than adults, making these conversations particularly difficult, if not completely unproductive.

Rather than waiting for a crisis in order to obtain permission to clear the parent/child hurdle, we suggested Home Instead educate adult boomers on how to move beyond it.

Last week it launched the “40-70 Rule” and a new Web site, 4070talk.com. It is an information-

packed program designed to help adult children and their aging parents deal with those sensitive topics that often make conversations difficult. The idea is simple: If you're 40, or your parents are 70, it's time to start talking — at least about certain senior topics. It uses age milestones as the permission slip, averting any crisis-based discussions and decisions.

For those boomers still in the parent trap, it's one program we think people will talk about.

• Matt Thornhill is the founder and president of the Boomer Project, and co-author of Boomer Consumer.