

# Role reversal in caregiving

by Kim Henry

As parents age, many families experience a shift. It might start with helping drive your parent to an appointment as they become less mobile, or picking up some medications. Gradually, with declining physical health or cognitive changes, small errands turn into managing daily care, medications and finances. This is role reversal – a shift many families experience, but few feel prepared for.

## What is role reversal

At its core, role reversal means children gradually taking on the caregiving responsibilities once handled by their parents. While common, it can reshape family roles in ways that feel unfamiliar and, at times, overwhelming.

Caregiving typically falls into **three categories**: managing daily logistics (cooking, cleaning, finances – also known as IADLs), providing personal care (bathing, dressing – and other ADLs) and emotional care. The last category is often complex, spanning from offering support, reassurance and companionship to becoming a full confidant for your parent.

## Emotional struggles

For **young caregivers**, role reversal can be particularly challenging. They often experience parentification – taking on tasks and responsibilities that exceed their age and fall outside traditional parent/child roles. The pressure of being responsible for a parent's wellbeing can lead to heightened anxiety, confusion about identity beyond caregiving and missing out on important milestones.

Even for **adult children**, the emotional weight of caregiving can be significant. Many balance work, friendships, family life and personal responsibilities with their caregiving role. It's common to feel pulled in all directions, wondering whether you're doing enough. Guilt, resentment and exhaustion can slowly grow, especially as free time begins to shrink.

At the same time, **aging parents** often struggle with the loss of independence. They may deny the level of support they need, resist or selectively accept care, question caregiving decisions, feel embarrassed or fear becoming a burden.



In many cases, both parent and caregiver are grieving – one mourning a loss of autonomy, the other – loss of time and the emotional weight of stepping into such a heavy, intimate role. If not acknowledged, this shared grief can place strain on the relationship and lead to conflict.

## What can help

One helpful approach is **viewing the role reversal as a partnership**, not “parenting a parent.” Including parents in decisions about their care whenever possible can preserve their sense of dignity and control over their life. Open communication about care-related decisions and sensitive topics is best done early, before a crisis arises. These discussions aren't always easy, but they can help achieve full understanding, avoid conflict and build mutual respect.

**Establishing healthy boundaries** is equally important. Caregiving doesn't mean doing everything alone. Delegating tasks, seeking support from family or external sources and being honest about your limits is essential for preventing burnout. Protecting your wellbeing is not selfish – it's essential.

Look out for a few **signs that the care relationship is becoming strained**. For caregivers, this might look like irritability, chronic stress or neglect of their own health. For aging parents, secrecy about medications or their health is often a sign they are uncomfortable with the care arrangement.

Ultimately, role reversal in caregiving is less about replacing the parent role and more about reframing the relationship. When approached with empathy, clear boundaries, mutual respect and open communication, the transition can lead to a strengthened family bond, one where both parties maintain a sense of dignity and connection.