

A TOUGH CALL: TO PARENT OR BEFRIEND

The phone rang. I answered it.

So did Barbara, my 22 year old daughter.

"Hello," she said before I could get a word out.

"How are you feeling this morning?" asked her older sister, Sherri. It was July 5th.

"Not too bad."

"Are you gonna tell Mom?" asked Sherri?

What?! What's going on here? Tell me what?

I had just a split second to made up my mind. Should I address it squarely or let it go?

"Tell me what?" I said. More a demand than a question.

They broke up into hysterical laughter. I did, too. Caught red handed!

"What are you doing on the phone? Are you eavesdropping?" said Barbara, ever one to put up a good offense as a defense.

"Come on, Barb. I picked up when you did and didn't have a chance to say hi yet," I explained. "So what happened?"

Turns out that Barb and Sherri had gone up to 50th Street to watch fireworks and Barb had foolishly walked out to the water with a drink in her hand and gotten cited for violating the open container law.

Okay, dumb but no biggie. At least she's of legal age.

We talked it through a little more, I hung up the phone, and they did, too, shortly.

But it's never an easy judgment call. Do you parent or do you befriend?

When the kids were younger, before they left for college, for sure but also during, my choice was always to be the parent. To risk making the hard unpopular decision and to

stand by it, tolerating my teenager's wrath and the breach in the relationship that followed. When they were very little, it was easier to choose to uphold standards, teach values, say "no." One of the joys of little kids is that they forgive quickly, wanting Mommy's and Daddy's love again right away. As kids become teenagers, their job is to define themselves in ways that separate and distinguish them from their parents. To the extent that this doesn't put them in jeopardy and is mostly within the law, good sense as a parent says to let as much as you can slide by.

Too many parents these days want to be friends with their kids. They are afraid to risk their children's anger. They do not have enough trust in themselves and their own judgment and they do not have enough trust in the relationship that they've built with their children to make and stand by the hard choices that build character and keep teenagers safe. Kids want parents to be parents, not friends.

There is, indeed, a time when friendship with your kids is appropriate. It is after they've been living on their own and making lives of their own. Being a quasi-friend means parenting with a light touch. It means that as a parent, you can say what you think but know that even though they're grown up, your words penetrate more easily and deeply, carry more weight and have more impact, than a friend's.

And there is no such thing as *constructive* criticism. Advice that is not asked for is, by definition, criticism. So as a parent, you are entitled to what you think and how you feel but *first ask* your child if your advice is wanted and then offer it as *your opinion* and not as the right answer. It is not appropriate to *tell* grown children what (not) to do or to assume that you have an open invitation to speak your mind.

It's a tricky job, this parenting. There are no hard and fast rules. It depends on the kid and the fit between the parent and kid. It is a moment to moment tightrope act of trying to get it right.