

FamilyLife Today® Radio Transcript

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Making the Big Transition

Guests: Dennis and Barbara Rainey
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Bob: There are some parenting patterns that define how we relate to our children as they're growing up. When they become adults, we better be ready to adjust some of those patterns. Here's Barbara Rainey.

Barbara: As a mom, I have been giving them direction all their lives—for 18/20 years—even after they've moved into *official* adulthood, as we've defined it. It's been harder for me to step back and let them just talk or to say, "What do you think?" because I'm so in the habit of offering a solution or steering them in a certain direction.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today. Our host is the President of FamilyLife®, Dennis Rainey, and I'm Bob Lepine. We'll talk today about some other habits that parents need to break as our children become adults. Stay with us.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us. I've told this story for years about a dad who was out raking leaves in the yard. In the middle of raking the leaves, he looked down, and there on the ground was a little baby bird. He looked up in the tree, and he saw the nest in the tree. He thought, "Well, that poor little bird fell out of that nest,"—the bird was squawking and helpless on the ground. The dad went and got a ladder, scooped the little bird up, climbed the ladder, put the bird back in the nest, climbed down, started raking leaves again.

Five minutes later, he looks down on the ground, and there's a little baby bird on the ground. He looks back at the nest. This time, there is a mama bird there, in the nest, looking down at him as if to say, "Leave the baby bird alone." The dad looks at the mama and then the bird—puts his rake down and goes into the living room. His son is on the sofa, watching TV. And he [dad] says, "You need to go get a job!" [Laughter] That is how it feels sometimes; doesn't it? [Laughter]

Dennis: You know, Barbara and I were in the hill country of Texas.

Quite honestly, I forget the town; but right outside of town there was an eagle's nest. Bob, the eagle's nest was as big as this table. We looked to the side of the road; and this eagle's nest, evidently, on an annual basis, is used by these eagles to raise their

young.

There were about a dozen cars with people, with spotting scopes, watching. There was a young eagle on the edge of the nest. We read the deal and it said, “X’ number of weeks—they’re out of there.” And it was right at the brink. Barbara and I looked at each other and said, “Are we going to wait for this young eaglet to be nudged out of there?” because mama was home. It was about noon. You just wondered when, on that day, it was going to happen. We looked at each other and thought: “You know what? We’ve kicked six out of the nest.

“We’re not waiting on a seventh. We’re going on our own way,” because we were on vacation.

But the reality is—children were made to fly. They were made to fly on their own, and they weren’t meant to be propped up permanently by their parents. The goal of parenthood—if you really understand the essence of the Bible is teaching us—is to raise children, who will be independently dependent upon Jesus Christ. They are not to grow up to become dependent upon us, as parents—upon our financial resources / our emotional support. They are to grow up, ultimately, to lean upon Him and learn to trust Him, even as we have learned to trust Him.

Bob: Barbara is with us this week—Barbara, welcome back to the program.

Barbara: Thank you, Bob.

Bob: You sensed, even in your own heart, when you were growing up, that you needed to begin to become independent of your parents while you were in college; right?

Barbara: Yes; I remember, when I was a freshman in college, I had a boyfriend back home, which was a long ways away.

Dennis: It wasn’t me, either, by the way. [Laughter]

Barbara: No; it wasn’t him, either. Sorry, dear; it wasn’t you. [Laughter] But as a freshman in college, I spent some time on the phone. I exceeded my monthly allowance. I don’t even remember now how the whole system worked, because it was before cell phones and all of that business. The phone was—it may even have been down the hall; because I’m not even sure we had phones in our rooms, individually, in those days. At any rate, I remember that somehow I ran up more of a phone bill than I was allowed.

I remember going to a pawn shop and selling something. I don’t know what I had that was valuable enough that they would want to buy, but I remember not wanting to call my parents and have to ask for more money and tell them that I had gone over my

phone limit. I knew that, if I went over my phone limit, it was *my* problem not theirs; and I needed to find a way to solve it.

I remember trying to scrape together something that I could sell to get money to pay my phone bill, because I knew it was my problem.

Bob: Now, years later, you had a daughter in college, who signed up for health club membership, and found herself in a similar situation; right?

Barbara: We've had several of those with several of our kids; but, yes, our oldest one signed up to join this exercise facility with great intentions of going on a regular basis, and didn't go as often as she wanted, and didn't realize how much it was going to eat into her little meager allowance. She had really gotten herself in a situation, where she was strapped. I remember her calling us and complaining about the fact that she didn't have enough money to make ends meet because she had this commitment to a health club.

Dennis: And it was really kind of pitiful when we went over and visited her that semester. [Laughter] I'm sorry to laugh about it right now; but we went into her little living space, where she was there. She had all of these—is it called ragoo?

Barbara: No; ramen noodles.

Dennis: —ramen noodles.

Barbara: They were like 15 cents a package then or something.

Bob: Yes! That's the college diet, right there!

Barbara: It is.

Dennis: I looked at that; and I go, "Man, I don't know what food groups are in that thing; but there are not many food groups in there." [Laughter] She was living off those noodles, because she had this health club membership. You know, you really had to just bite your lip to keep from laughing; because—here's where parents lose it, though, Bob. Instead of kind of laughing about it and letting it flow off our backs, we: "Oh, Sweetheart, I'll take care of it."

Bob: Yes; bail them out?

Barbara: Well, and you want to, as a parent, because—I mean, really and truly, ramen noodles are pretty bad. And so you look at your child—and all of her friends have these unlimited budgets, and they're going out to eat all the time—and you do kind of feel sorry for them that they're suffering. But we didn't bail her out.

Dennis: No; we didn't bail her out. We kept trying to point our children toward being independently dependent upon Jesus Christ.

A few years later, it was another daughter, where you received a phone call, Sweetheart, that was another moment, where—after you've raised a few, Bob, you begin to recognize these moments as they occur—and so you're kind of ready for it; but share that story, Sweetie.

Barbara: Well, this is another one of our daughters—who was in college, and who had made some commitments, and didn't have enough money. This daughter had car trouble or something happened—I can't remember what it was exactly right now—but she called, saying: "I just don't think I can afford this. This is just going to be so hard. I just don't have enough money." It was such a sad story. I remember saying, "This is really going to be exciting to see how God is going to provide for you, as you depend on Him." There was kind of silence for a minute; because I think she was thinking I was going to say: "Well, I'll write you a check for \$50 and stick it in the mail tomorrow. You'll have it in a couple of days, and you'll be fine."

Instead, I said, "This is a great opportunity to see how God is going to provide for you!" and I really meant it. I wasn't saying that just because I didn't want to help her.

I really did believe that it was a *great* opportunity for her to see God provide for her, because we want our kids to have firsthand experience of a real relationship with Jesus Christ. If we, as parents, step in and bail them out all the time, they'll never have to learn to depend on Him.

Bob: We've talked already this week about the fact that from the time of high school graduation until some point in the future—a defined point, a marker, an exit sign—you are transitioning your child to full emancipated adulthood—to the time when they're going to pay the car insurance. Some kids already do that in high school; you know? Or when they're going to be responsible for their own health insurance / they're going to fill out their own 1040s—they're going to do their own income taxes—all of that. That time needs to happen either when they get married, or they graduate from college, or they're working full time—something out there in the future. You better aim them in that direction, and let them know it's coming, and get them ready for it.

Dennis: And spell it out so that they're not surprised by it.

Bob: As your children are going through their transition to full emancipation, you're going through an adjustment phase, as parents; because, when they're fully emancipated, your relationship with them is going to need to be a fundamentally different kind of relationship. So while they're in transition, you're transitioning from a hands-on parent—

Dennis: Boy, are you!

Bob: —to a little more of a hands-off.

Dennis: It's a hard transition too.

Bob: And you guys have made some mistakes in the process; right?

Dennis: I would say that Barbara and I have made more mistakes in the transition period than we have after that emancipation proclamation has been declared, either upon graduation from college, getting married, or through some kind of ceremony that we've had.

Our mistakes have come in this transition period, where they're changing / we're changing. Our parenting is being redefined, and our relationship with them is being redefined.

Bob: Barbara, as you look at the transition you've had to make, are there a couple of areas, where you'd say, "These are areas where it's been tough for me"?

Barbara: I think one of the things that's been hardest for me is allowing my children—as they have been in college or on their own, and then have moved in, even after they've moved into *official* adulthood, as we've defined it—listening to them talk without trying to help with a solution or a judgment. I don't mean by judgment a criticism as much as I mean—as a mom, I have been giving them direction all their lives—for 18/20 years. They'll come to me and say, "What do you think about this?" And so I give them my opinion, and they know that I'm pretty opinionated. [Laughter] I really believe strongly certain things; and so I've not been afraid to try to influence them, because I really want them to make wise choices.

As they've grown up, I've really been involved in talking to them about all the issues they face and giving them all the reasons why the biblical choice is the best choice and all that. So, therefore, as they have moved into college and into adulthood, and they call and want to talk about what's going on, it's been harder for me to step back and let them just talk or to say, "Well, what do you think?" because I'm so in the habit of offering a solution or steering them in a certain direction.

Dennis: And I've watched Barbara as she's related to both our sons and our daughters. Being a mom, I think, is harder in the transition phase than being a dad. I think the reason is—I think it's the totality of a mom's job—it's her assignment.

Well, all of a sudden, her assignment is being kicked out of the nest and starting to fly on his own or her own. You've been used to making those little adjustments as they go.

But, for a man, you're going, "Yes; they need to grow up,"—you know, kind of make an objective decision. I don't think like a mom does—I have my own Achilles' heel when it comes to my children.

Bob: And what would that be? What are some of the mistakes you've made in transition?

Dennis: Well, I think in wanting to make sure they make the right decisions, and make those decisions in the best possible way, and wanting to help them get all the facts so they know all the facts as they make the decision—

Bob: And the right decision is the one that—

Dennis: —in the very best way.

Bob: And the right decision is the one that you would make if you were in the same situation; right?

Dennis: You might say that [Laughter]—and kind of helping that process along. Dads are engaging in this process. I think this is where it's hard for us, on the decision-making piece, because we've got some skill in decision-making; because we've made several hundred bad decisions—that's how you learn how to make a good one.

It's very difficult to sit back and watch a child make a bad decision.

Bob: So if you had to coach parents, who are taking kids through the transition period, and say: "Here are the pitfalls. Watch out for some of these things,"—just give us some of the areas where you'd warn them.

Dennis: Well, begin to treat them like adults, not children. Realize they're no longer under the same authority that they were when they lived under your roof. Don't manipulate them / don't create guilt to get them to do things that you want them to do. Don't turn around and try to get your children to show up at holidays or to go on family vacations with you because you somehow called them on the phone and complained, or moaned, or tried to create false sympathy, or just flat-out manipulated them to get them to do what you wanted them to do.

Bob: Good. What else?

Dennis: Well, letting go—but letting go too much.

Now, I know that may sound like a bit of a paradox; because we are to let them go. But if you let them go too quickly and you make the transition too fast, that doesn't allow

them to truly process the transition. I've had adult children in our family tell us—both Barbara and me—that they felt like we abandoned them. So this is not an exact science we're talking about here.

As you let a young person go to become an adult—one you can let go, and step out, and they'll take off and fly / another one needs you to come alongside them, as they're kicked out of the nest, to help them make a few decisions and get some confidence underneath their wings. That's why it's so difficult to do this in families like ours—with six kids, you can't say, “One size fits all.”

Bob: You have to adjust the recipe for different children. Barbara, with some—it may be that one email a week is sufficient; but with another one, it's insufficient; right?

Barbara: Yes; because with some of our kids, we've talked to them on a fairly regular basis, when they've been gone—you know, sometimes during the week, we'll talk five or six times they may be very, very short little touch-point kinds of conversations—but with other kids, we'll talk once a week or even more infrequently; they're okay with that.

Bob: I'll tell you what—technology has changed all of that. I'm thinking back to the fact that we used to make one long distance phone call a week to my grandparents—to my dad's mom and dad. It was for a prescribed amount of time at a certain time of the week—on Sunday, for 20 minutes, you'd call Grandma and Grandpa. My parents would write a letter, usually once a week, to their parents.

Well, now, with email and the fact that you've got no long distance and no roaming charges on the cell phone, the expectations change. You go a couple of days without a quick cell phone call and “What's the problem? How come I haven't heard from you?”

Dennis: Yes; there's really no reason why we can't stay in touch and communicate today; and yet, that is a way we fail one another.

I'll tell you what I think may be one of the biggest issues for parents—as they let their children go and move on toward adulthood—and that is letting them *fail* / stepping back, and watching them hit the wall, headfirst, and all the pain. We see it coming, and we try to prevent it; but you can't. I think it's difficult for a dad; but truthfully, this is another area where I think moms die a thousand deaths here.

Bob: Now, hang on! If you see a child headed toward failure, shouldn't you speak up and say, “I wouldn't do that if I were you”?

Barbara: I think if it's the first time, yes; or maybe even the second time—and it depends on what it is.

But for instance, we have a child who has had a lot of trouble bouncing checks. The first

few times, we would say, “A good solution would be to not ever spend below ‘x’ amount of money in your checking account—\$25/\$50,”—whatever. We gave some coaching tips to kind of try to help that process along; but after a while, obviously, the coaching didn't really matter. Somehow, in their way of thinking, it was okay. So you just have to let it go.

Now, if it's a real serious relationship issue, it might be a little bit different; because that's just a more weighty decision. Bouncing checks is crummy when you've got to write that \$25 fee—but it is \$25. A relationship is a whole lot different. So you might approach them differently, depending on what the situation is.

Dennis: Yes; I've received some phone calls from banks on one of our children writing hot checks and bouncing them and passing on the information to the child.

Barbara: And that hurts when you get that kind of phone call, as a parent; because it's *embarrassing*. You just go, “Ohh!”

Bob: Your reputation's at stake.

Barbara: Well, and you go, “I thought we trained them better than that”; because we worked hard on that one.

Dennis: Yes; I do think there are pivotal points—whether your child is in this transition phase or already reached adulthood and they're on their own—where, if they're about to make a critical error in terms of marrying a person, whom you consider to be a person that would not be the right person for them, I think you have to step in and fire a silver bullet. Now, we're going to talk more about this later on in the week; but as parents, I think there are obligations we have to our children when that failure is going to impact the rest of their lives, especially around marriage, and could impact future generations. I think we need to go to the child with the right attitude and appeal to them.

I would say, for Barbara and me, this situation has been one of the more interesting dances that we have ever done as we have raised our children to adulthood.

Bob: Again, the point we're trying to make here is that your children are moving toward full adulthood and, in the process, we've got to be adjusting, as parents, to treating them with the respect and the freedom that full adulthood brings with it.

Dennis: And, Bob, there is one last area that we haven't talked enough about. It's something that Barbara and I have done repeatedly. But as you look at this transition phase and as they move into adulthood, do not underestimate the importance of prayer. I think our children desperately need us to intercede before God on their behalf and ask God to orchestrate events/circumstances that teach them where real life is found.

If they miss that most important point of not being independently dependent upon Jesus Christ, then they've missed life. Your prayers may be the most important thing you offer on behalf of your children as they *emerge* into adults.

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I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, and our global broadcast manager Rhonda Street. I also want to thank our editor Larry Loraine. For Dennis Rainey and Bob Lepine, I'm Michelle Hill and I invite you to join us again tomorrow for another edition of *FamilyLife Today*.

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