Keep Your Mouth Shut and the Welcome Mat Out

Guest: Jim Burns
From the series: Doing Life with Your Adult Kids (Day 1 of 3)
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Bob: When your adult children start making decisions or making choices that conflict with how you brought them up/with how they were raised, what do you do about that as a parent? Here's counsel from Jim Burns.

Jim: I've said to parents so many times—it could be whatever: lifestyle choice, or straying from faith, or whatever—“Do they know what you believe? Do they know how you feel?”—fine. Now, don't become a one-topic parent. Make sure that you're loving them for how you would love your neighbors or how you would love anybody else.” I think that a lot of times, when it's our own children, that we then become a one-topic parent.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Monday, September 23rd. Our hosts are Dave and Ann Wilson; I'm Bob Lepine. Parenting is a challenge at every stage in the process, and that's still true when our children become adults. We'll talk more about that today. Stay with us.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us. So, do we still call it, “parenting”? I mean, when your kids are at home, you're actively involved in shaping the direction of their lives/their future; right?

Ann: Right.

Bob: That's what we do as parents.

Ann: Yes.

Bob: Do you still call it parenting when they're married and they've move out?

Ann: We do in secret. [Laughter]

Bob: You don't tell them that. [Laughter]

Ann: Right.

Dave: I call it coaching.
Bob: It's a different dynamic; isn't it?

Dave: Yes; but they don't want to be coached, so—[Laughter]

Bob: Yes. We're going to spend some time this week in a conversation about this; because this is something that, after 20 or 30 years—of hands-on, intentional, focused shaping of the lives of young people—to, all of a sudden, go, “Oh, that's not my job anymore,”—that's a pivot for parents that's hard to make.

Ann: And I'm just going to say that it's a hard transition; because suddenly—the things that you would just say freely and openly—now, you're trying grab those and think: “Should I say it? I want to say it.”

Dave: The other day, our youngest [grandchild]—Bryce is almost five months—and we're over there. He [son] hands him to us, and he's telling us how to take care of their little baby. [Laughter] I'm like, “Dude, how many kids have we raised?” “Well, you don't know what you're doing; don't hold him like that.” I'm like, “Okay, here you go,”—like they're trying to tell you how to live your life.

Bob: Well, then you're observing their parenting; and you have coaching suggestions for them, and you're biting your tongue.

We've got Jim Burns joining us on FamilyLife Today.

Ann: He's an expert.

Dave: He's over there, biting his tongue right now.

Bob: Jim, welcome back.

Jim: It's great to be back. Boy, this feels like we're sitting at Starbucks®, just complaining about our “adult” kids. [Laughter]

Bob: That's right. Get-off-my-lawn parenting right here; that's what we're talking about. [Laughter]

Jim gives leadership to HomeWord and is Executive Director of the HomeWord Center for Youth and Family at Azusa Pacific University. He's written a number of books. He's recently written a book, and I love the subtitle: Doing Life with Your Adult Children. The subtitle—this is really the whole thing, right here—

Dave: Yes

Ann: Yes.
Bob: —*Keep Your Mouth Shut and the Welcome Mat Out.*

This book really—there was kind of an epiphany moment, where you said, “I've got to spend some time, first, investigating and, then, writing.” You were speaking on this subject in Hawaii; right?

Jim: Exactly. Somebody had said to come and speak in Hawaii. I said, “Let me pray about it.” “Yes; that will be alright.” [Laughter]

Ann: Yes; and there was point, Jim, that you say that the crowd groaned in pain. What happened?

Jim: What happened was—I didn't want to give the talk, because it's a convention of about 4500 people. Our friends asked us to do that seminar; and I said, “No; don't put me in that slot, because we're desperate—Cathy and I are desperate.” All three of our kids said—well, they were saying they were adults at the time; you know, they were 18, 19, 20—and they were, “Well, we're adults.” I'm thinking, “Well, I'm still paying for your cell phone, and college payments,”—and, you know, whatever. [Laughter]

I needed help in some ways; they convinced me to do it. It shocked us—Cathy and I didn't see this coming—but you know: “You see kids violating values/you see kids not wanting your advice. For two decades, you dedicate your entire life to being that parent that gave them advice and was somewhat in control.” When I said that, and I talked about straying from the faith, the people groaned. And I'm sure people have groaned when I've spoken before [Laughter]—maybe silently—but this was an *audible* groan.

Later, I said to my wife, who was in the group with me, “Did you hear that groan?” And she said, “Yes.” It hit a nerve; and it's continued to hit nerves of people, who have children, who are adults—whether they be just moving into “adulthood” or if they even have grandkids—like you were saying, with holding Bryce wrong. It really is a unique thing, because I didn't see this coming. I *truly* did not see it coming. I honestly thought it was going to be great, simple, easy. Talk about biting tongue—I know we're doing radio, but there is a scar on my tongue, because I had to *learn* to do that. [Laughter] It's a learned trait.

Bob: I think we honestly all kind of just presumed that we would shape the direction for our children and that, when it came to their theological views, their political views, their goals and values—they would just absorb what we believe and flow out in them. Of course, now, I'm looking, going, “I didn't do that with my parents,”—

Ann: Right.

Bob: —right?—I wound up going in directions that they were looking at and going: “Are you sure about that? What are you…” So why was I so naïve as to think my kids would
just grow up and say: “Yes, we’re just going to do exactly what you would do in the same situation. We’re going to be little mini-yous and mini-robots.” That's just unrealistic thinking, from the beginning.

Jim: Yes, but we still do that. In fact, when I was first speaking on this subject/when I was first writing on it, I was talking about “Parenting Your Adult Child.” I actually made a conscious move to call it “Doing Life with Your Adult Child,” because the parenting changes. We are the parents; they still call us “Dad”/”Mom.”

Dave: Yes.

Jim: But what happens—I think, a lot of times, we actually have to reinvent the relationship. And actually, I think it's our job to hand them the passport to adulthood. That means that, frankly, we're fired from our day-to-day job.

Now, you mentioned this Dave—you said the word, “coach.” Coaches lead; coaches take charge. Coaches sometimes take a time-out.

Dave: Right.

Jim: I think we move to coaching—for me, coaching and mentoring is kind of similar.

Dave: Yes.

Jim: I've found that, if I'll keep my mouth shut, they will come back. I had a conversation yesterday with my daughter, Heidi, who is our youngest. It was a mentoring conversation that—if I would have started that, I don't think she would have been real thrilled about the conversation—but she came to me as kind of a “coach and mentor,” and we had a fabulous conversation.

Dave: Yes. What's really interesting—and you say this at the beginning of your book—is how painful it is when you heard that groan. We talk to so many parents, when their children are going a different direction; and I mean, there are tears. That's why the book is so needed—it's like, “Man, this is hard.”

Jim: Well, you know, we don't see it coming.

I was talking with somebody recently who had their kids at our church, and they had the kids in Christian school. They really had been very good parents; I admired them from the past. One of the things I had to say to them was: “Really good parents have kids who still make poor choices.” Their kids have made some shocking choices to them.

Judith Viorst—she wrote a book, that we probably read to our children, called Alexander and His Very Bad Horrible Day—
Ann: Yes.

Jim: —just a fun children's book. One of the things she said, in speaking about adult children is: “It's a loss. You have to grieve the loss.” That doesn't mean that you've lost your children, but what it means is that you've lost the relationship you had when they were younger. As I look at that, there is a sense of loss, whether they have violated values or whether they haven't.

Dave: Right.

Jim: The relationship changes. I think that part of it is our responsibility to help them, because they don't know what they're doing either. I finally had to realize: “I've got to re-invent this relationship. I don't know what I'm doing and my kids don't either; because they've never been an adult, either. They don't know how to relate to us.”

Dave: Right.

Jim: But loss is something we don't think about when our kids are eight/nine. [Laughter] But now, as they get older, it's this loss of the day-to-day relationship, where: “Do they need you?” or “…not need you?” That's a question that a lot of parents struggle with.

I think there's some great hope for them—you can change that relationship from a parent-child to more of an adult-adult, You're still mom; and you're still dad, though.

Ann: You've used that word, re-invent, several times. How do we learn how to do that? It's new; it's different, especially, if your kids are married. I have three sons, and so my relationship with them is very different; because they're all married. Their first priority is their wife; so I'm always thinking, “What is my role now?” I think that re-inventing is very true—we have to kind of reestablish relationships.

Jim: Exactly; it's a process. I don't think that it's something that we just do. I don't think there's a job description out there; although I think that, even in the book, I talk about a job description. I don't really think there's this heavy-duty job description, but it is different.

I was talking with a woman, recently, about having sons; she had three sons, too. She was getting blocked by one of the daughter-in-laws to her son and to the kids. I said: “You know, your relationship to your son and your grandkids is through your daughter-in-law,” and “You're going to have to be a cheerleader.” And she goes, “Well, I'm not even sure that I like her.” [Laughter] I get that.

Ann: Yes.

Jim: And yet, the truth was—what she was going to have to figure out was: “How do I show an abundance of love and support to this woman?”—who was kind of blocking her
from her son—but at the same time, had to relinquish the incredible relationship that you have.

I grew up in a home with all boys. You know, that we had with our mom, and I watched my mom kind of relinquish the relationship to my wife, Cathy, in a beautiful way. I bet that was hard for her; she never talked about it.

Ann: Yes, it’s re-inventing the relationship. It's new; it's different; it's conversations—yes, that's good.

Dave: I remember when Ann and I got married—her dad was my baseball coach in high school, but I didn't know this about him—when we got married, immediately, he established an adult-to-adult relationship with me. I had never had an adult do that with me; I didn't even know he was doing it. He wanted my opinion; he respected my thoughts. I remember learning, as a young 22-year-old man—with hair, by the way, back then—we all had hair back then.

Jim: I had hair back then, too. Mine was maybe 21.

Dave: I had the bang—you know, one bang.

But anyway, I remember from watching him, thinking: “That's how you re-invent.”

Jim: Yes.

Dave: It was a beautiful way to learn. I almost wanted him to tell me what to do, but he wouldn't. It was pretty cool to watch. It developed a great relationship; I think that's really hard.

Jim: Dave, he mentored you. And I think for a lot of us, we didn't ever think about what we were going to do, as parents, of adults. I think we do need to find people and say: “How’s it work for you? What did you learn?” A few times, we talked to people, who had older kids than our kids; and they gave us answers that we kind of didn't like. [Laughter] They said: “Honestly, you need to let go,” and “You need to let them take the responsibility for some of the relational issues. You're done with it.”

In the book, I tell a story about a woman, who is in the Silicon Valley. She's 45, and she's vice president of one of the great tech companies of the world; so she's a multi-millionaire. Her mom said to her: “Honey, it's cold outside. Put on your coat before you leave.” [Laughter] And she said, “Mom, I'm pretty capable of deciding,”—this is a multi-millionaire, who's the vice president of a tech firm. And she says, “You know, I can do what I kind of choose.” And she said, “No, I'm your mom—put on your coat.” I said to her, “What did you do?” She said, “I put on my coat, and I left.” [Laughter]
You know, it's hard to ever get out of that role of taking care of your children; and yet, it probably would have been wise of the mom to say: “You know what? If she freezes, that's her problem.” That's a hard thing to do.

**Bob:** If this parenting relationship does need to shift, and it does, do we include our kids in the conversation about what that shift should look like? And how much say do they have in what the new relationship should be versus how much say we should have?

**Jim:** I think that, in a perfect relationship, it's mutual discussion. We're having that conversation with our daughter, Christy/her husband, Steve—they're coming to move with us.

**Bob:** Move in?

**Jim:** Move in. They're boomeranging; because they're moving from Dallas back to southern California, and they need a place to stay. We're happy to do that, but we felt like we needed to give them some boundaries. We also felt like we needed to hear from them, too. I loved it; Steve, our son-in-law, was just wonderful; he didn't say anything. And Christy, actually—she had some other words. [Laughter]

**Bob:** He was wonderful; he didn't say anything. [Laughter]

**Jim:** He kept his mouth shut. [Laughter]

**Ann:** What kind of boundaries did Christy have?

**Jim:** What Christy said is: “I really want you guys to engage with us and whatnot, but I also want you guys to make sure that you have some time; because last time, you guys just kinds of quit your life and you just hung out with us. We want you guys to make sure that you feel comfortable.” She gave us permission to take a trip, or “Mom if you need to go with dad someplace, then do it. We'll work it out. We're big kids now.” And then also what Christy said, which I really appreciated—she said, “I think we to, also, talk about who's going to have what duty with some of the food and things like that.”

**Ann:** She was protecting you guys, really.

**Jim:** She was. I really, really appreciated that; and yet, at the same time, we felt like we needed an exit strategy for them. We needed to have some of those kinds of boundary things, too.

**Bob:** This is an interesting kind of sub-topic; because doing life with your adult children looks one way, when they live at their house; you live at your house. They're paying their bills; you're paying your bills—the relational dynamic there is one thing.
When the boomerang thing happens, or when you have a shared space, all of a sudden, this takes a level nuance and a level of, “What does this relationship look like?” This is whether they're married and bringing grandkids home; or you've got a 27-year-old, who's back home because career things are getting settled——

Jim: Right.

Bob: —is he just going out and coming in whenever he wants to?—and having people over whenever he wants to? All of those kinds of issues have got to be talked about.

Jim: Yes; you're right, Bob. This is the issue that we keep hearing about. People are saying: “My kids—they came home,”—maybe they're in college or the workforce and they came home—“They stay up later than we do. They play video games until the wee hours of the morning.” You know, there's just all these different changes; or they have violated their values. “When do you basically say to them, 'Let's create a plan’?”

Or actually, there is something—and I think this is fascinating—there is actually something called the “Failure to Launch Syndrome.”

Bob: Yes.

Dave: Wow.

Jim: I think we have a lot of young adults, who are failing to launch; and I don't know that that's all their issue. They've got a pretty good deal going on. The question that Cathy and I had with all three of our girls was: “Are we enabling dependence?” and “Are we enabling dependence partly because of our own need?”—we still want to be liked and needed. We like the idea that we can kind of care for them, because that's what we do; we nurtured them for 20 years.

Ann: It feels good.

Jim: Yes; I think some parents have to look at it and say, “Okay, am I enabling dependence on me for some of my own needs?” Our daughter, Rebecca—she moved in—her girlfriend had moved away. She said: “I need about two months. Can I come back?” We said, “Awesome.” Then she decided to go back and get a degree in clinical psych—master's degree to become a counselor. We said: “Fantastic! While you're doing this class, and while you're working and doing this masters, you're more than welcome.”

Bob: So, let me just change the paradigm of the scenario a little bit. Let's say Becca isn't pursuing clinical psych—she's working at the mall, and she's living in her old room, and she doesn't go to church anymore, and there are some nights where she doesn't come home.

Ann: —or call.
Bob: Yes. And when you say, you know, “Where were you last night?” she goes, “At a friend's.” And you're thinking, “I think it was a guy friend you're spending the night with.” As parents, do you just go: “Well, she's our daughter. We've got to—this is what we do,” or do you say, “If these are your values and how you're living, you've got to do it on your own dime”?

Jim: I think it's the latter. I think what you have to do is say: “We absolutely understand that, as an adult, you may choose to live a different way than we do. You know our values; you know what we believe; you know what we think; and you know how much we love you. We love you so much;”—this is called tough love, but it’s not mean—“but because we love you so much, we think it's probably appropriate for you, in the next month/month-and-a-half”—I mean, don't do it in the heat of emotion; but—“in the next month/month-and-a-half, we think it's very appropriate for you to get your own place.”

Now, there will be parents, who say to me: “But if I say that, she's moving in with the guy,”—

Bob: Right.

Jim: —“She's going to become homeless,” or whatever—I've heard all of them.

Bob: Right; right.

Jim: I still think what you're trying to do is help them to become a responsible adult. I mean, even in my work in parenting—they could have three rules; and I say, “What's the bottom line?” “To help them become a responsible adult, who loves God,’”—that's kind of my theme.

Dave: Yes.

Jim: When they're young adults, it's the same thing. All of our kids had moments—Christy graduated from a wonderful Christian college—her last article in the newspaper—because she wrote a column—said, “I had to disown my parent's faith to own my own faith.”

Dave: Yes.

Jim: Today, her faith is very strong, and we go to the same church. But during that time, that was messing with our heads: “What is she thinking?”—she wasn't real verbal about it. I knew she wasn't going to church all through college; I mean, she went to a Christian school, so she had chapels; but she wasn't doing church, and she wasn't as active. That was hard for us.
However, our job is to help them become that responsible adult. I've said to parents so many times—it could be whatever: lifestyle choice, or straying from faith, or whatever—“Do they know what you believe? Do they know how you feel?—fine. Now, don't become a one-topic parent. Make sure that you're loving them for how you would love your neighbors or how you would love anybody else.”

A lot of times, when it's our own children—they cohabitate, or they get caught with pornography, or whatever the issue might be/the list could be numerous—that we then become the one-topic parent.

Bob: I think that the point you make—if you start to view your adult kids in the same way that you would view a neighbor—this is hard to do; right?—because they're your kids. But if you start to think: “Okay; if I had a neighbor, who didn't go to church and had different values—how would I handle that? How would I try to be winsome and attractive in my faith, rather than coming along and saying, 'How come you don't do this anymore?' and 'How come...' That wouldn't work with my neighbor.”

Dave: Jim, you tell a story in your book about the dad, I think, that went on a ski trip—and didn't do that [become a one-topic parent]—he was sort of winsome; right?—just listened.

Jim: Exactly.

Dave: And then at the end of the trip, boom!

Jim: Yes; she had a change of heart and said: “This was the best time we've had together.” She knew what he believed—this is a good friend of mine, who used to keep notes in his top pocket to deal with her. [Laughter] I know this young woman now, and she was a handful! But this time, he just spent time with her, just related to her—they went skiing and snowboarding. It became a great experience—it was a catalyst for continued conversation; because even in that story—and other stories with that relationship—she would say: “Hey Dad, I know you're interested in this. Here's what's going on with me.”

And when she came back to church, it was so neat; because she called her dad up and said: “I know you've been probably praying for me. You've never told me you were praying for me, but I'm sure you were praying for me.” He was, and his wife was. “I went to church and I loved it, and I signed up for a Rooted Class;”—which is kind of a small group type thing—“and I'm all in.”

Ann: Wow.

Jim: I don't know if you can see this; but my eyes kind of welled up with tears, because I know that mom and dad wanted that so badly—for years.
**Dave:** Yes.

**Jim:** So when you start looking at the Scripture that says, “Train up a child in the way that they would go...” it doesn't say that there's not going to be a bruise along the way. I think we have to be faithful that God cares and loves them more than we do. Take a deep breath, because that's still almost—I preach that and, yet, it's so hard for me to understand that He could love my children more than I do!

**Dave:** Right.

**Bob:** And the train-up-a-child principle is a principle, not a promise; because there are kids, who go off the rails and stay off the rails.

**Jim:** Sure.

**Bob:** But our job is to be faithful. We can't control—these are actual human beings, who make/they have their own free will; they're not robots. And we have to, as parents, say that they are in God's hands. As you said, “He loves them more than we do.” We trust Him with their care; He can do things we can't do. So we pray; and we trust God; and we read books like, *Doing Life with Your Adult Children*.

**Dave:** I tell you what Jim—thank you. You don't know this/Bob doesn't know this; but the only people we talk to about raising adult children were Bob and Dennis Rainey at a marriage conference we did in Hershey, Pennsylvania—you remember that?—Saturday night. [Laughter].

**Bob:** It's coming back to me now; yes.

**Dave:** It's Saturday night. The couples are out on a date night. We go to the room and it's like, “Hey guys—can we ask you about adult children?” We had never talked to anybody.

Now, there's a resource that we can all use.

**Ann:** One of the things I loved in the book—at the beginning was your prayer of relinquishment, which begins, “God, I relinquish my children to Your care and Your watchfulness.” And then it goes on, “Give me the courage to let go as they move, sometimes ever so slowly, toward responsible adulthood.” That's a great prayer of relinquishment that you may have to pray every day.

**Jim:** Yes; I had to pray that prayer Sunday. Our daughter said that she was going to call us—she lives across the country—and she didn't get around to it. It's not that that was bad; she was just having fun with her friends. I could see her posting that she had been on a bike ride from New York City to Brooklyn, but she said she was going to call—I had worries.
And then I realized that: “You know, I need to relinquish her to You,”—and I know, eventually, she's going to call—and “By golly, she hasn't called yet.” But she said: “So sorry. I was going to call and I forgot.” I'm thinking: “Forgot. I looked forward to that all day”; but I didn't say that to her. [Laughter]

**Bob**: So, if you need a relinquishing resource—[Laughter]

**Dave**: —there it is.

**Bob**: It's what we've got in our *FamilyLife Today* Resource Center. Go to FamilyLifeToday.com to order a copy of Jim's book, *Doing Life with Your Adult Children: Keep Your Mouth Shut and the Welcome Mat Out*. Again, go to FamilyLifeToday.com; you can order a copy of the book from us online. Or call 1-800-358-6329. Again, that's 1-800-“F” as in family, “L” as in life, and the word, “TODAY.”

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And we hope you can join us back tomorrow as we're going to continue talking with Jim Burns about how we respond, as parents, when our adult kids/our grown-up kids start making choices that we have problems with. We'll talk more about that tomorrow. I hope you can tune in for that.
I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, along with our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our hosts, Dave and Ann Wilson, I’m Bob Lepine. We will see you next time for another edition of *FamilyLife Today*.

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