Don’t be the ‘Tiger Child’ at your family’s holiday gathering

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*Trying to micromanage an aging parent’s life can be a mistake*

Christmas dinner started out so well…

Call them the Tiger Children. The same people who micromanage their children as Tiger Moms and Dads are highly likely to turn around and do the same thing with their aging parents.

While it’s understandable to want to jump in and help parents with diminishing capacities, members of the sandwich generation should work to tame their inner Tiger Child if they’re home this week the holidays, experts say. The same goes for boomers without children of their own, who are equally susceptible to parental micromanagement.

The phrase “Tiger Mom” became popular after the 2011 publication of Yale Law School professor Amy Chua’s controversial memoir, “Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother.” Chua used the term to describe Asian-American parents who strictly enforce rules around study and extracurriculars, often closely managing their children as they go through their paces. Now, the term is commonly used to refer to strict parents of
all backgrounds who make decisions for their children, instead of letting their children explore and discover their own interests.

At the holidays, not surprisingly, Tiger types have a lot to say. Family gatherings offer an opportunity for members to discuss important life-planning topics, such as parents’ preferences for elder care and whether they have their estate plan in order. But one sure way to ruin “the talk,” and maybe jeopardize the whole celebration, is for adult children to railroad the discussion, experts say.

**Gifting vs. tipping during the holidays**

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During the holidays, when is it appropriate to tip, and when is giving a gift a better idea? MarketWatch’s Catey Hill discusses on Lunch Break.

One way that happens is when adult children speak for older parents who are perfectly capable of speaking for themselves. David Glickman, chief operating officer of Lively, a company that makes safety watches for older adults, notices the Tiger Child phenomenon (he came up with the phrase during our interview) when he fields customer service calls. Adult children will say things like, “My mom would never wear that,” and yet, when given the chance, Mom will happily give it a try, Glickman said.

Those planning to discuss financial or health-related topics with older relatives should keep in mind the end goal, said Sandy Markwood, CEO of the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging: “Ultimately, what you want to get out of the conversation is what Mom or Dad wants, not what you want.”

Talking can expose big differences in expectations between the generations. According to a Fidelity study earlier this year, 43% of adult children said they assume that they or a sibling will care for their parent if the parent becomes ill, whereas only 6% of parents said an adult child would care for them. (The study matched the responses of parents with their actual children.)

Here are some tips for holding “the talk” over the holidays:

**Set realistic expectations**

While adult children are more likely than their parents to initiate a discussion about the parents’ retirement needs, the parents themselves sometimes take the lead, experts say. Regardless of who makes the first move, it’s important to do a little advance planning.

That involves setting the agenda. It’s a tall order to discuss elder-care preferences, advance directives, powers of attorney, finances and other related topics in one sitting, so pick an issue or two to start. If you visit a parent’s home and notice mail piling up unread, for example, maybe that’s a cue that it’s best to discuss bill paying and financial management, Markwood said.

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While every family has a different communication style, experts say one nonthreatening way to initiate the talk is with an anecdote—e.g., “Mom, I learned that Bob’s mother just moved in with him up the block. Is moving in with one of us something you’d ever consider?”

A Tiger Child might want to resolve all the topics under discussion before the Christmas dinner dishes are dried. But sometimes just raising an issue is a good enough start, experts say. Plant the seed and then bring it up again another time.
Time it right

Ideally, families should discuss elder care before Dad has a stroke or Mom falls and breaks her hip—in other words, before a crisis. Since families get together over the holidays, it can be a good time to get the conversation started.

Yet even in that context, there can still be a right time and a wrong time. "Don’t do it over the dining room table at Christmas dinner," Markwood said. Choose some down time, like the morning after the big dinner. Some might think alcohol will help them talk about sensitive topics, but experts say it’s best to avoid scheduling a discussion for a time when there might be drinking.

What’s more, a holiday discussion might not be right for all families. Those with simmering tensions might avoid bringing up potentially difficult topics when there’s an expectation of happiness and good cheer, said Jody Gastfriend, vice president of senior care for Care.com.

Avoid promises

Some parents might try to extract a promise out of their children—e.g., “Promise me you’ll never put me in a nursing home.” A Tiger Child might be tempted to respond, “Fine, we’ve got you covered.” But the moment calls for humility, not certainty, experts say.

Sometimes, a good nursing home really is the best option for an ailing person, such as someone with advanced dementia. Adult children will be racked with guilt if they make a promise they can’t keep, and they might struggle to keep the promise against the best interests of everyone involved.

If asked to promise, an adult child could respond with something like this, Gastfriend suggests: “I so want to honor your wishes. That’s why we’re having this discussion. But I can’t possibly promise when I don’t know what your future needs will be, and what my capabilities will be.”