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When to Back Off?

By PAULA SPAN

Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times The author's father, Murray Span, 88, in the dining room of the continuing care facility in which he now lives.

My dad, Murray, is a chatty, gregarious guy — so I told the dining room manager when she stopped by on Day 1 at his new independent living apartment. This facility uses assigned seating at mealtimes, and I wanted his companions to be lively and stimulating.

She placed him at a table with two other men. Both are very pleasant and very quiet; when I visit at lunch, long silences prevail.

Should I encourage my father to ask about switching tables? Residents do that all the time, said a friend whose mother lives in the same facility. The dining room is a big part of the daily socializing.

But Dad shrugged off my concerns. “No, it’s fine,” he insisted. I wondered whether he enjoyed his tablemates’ company (they’re all World War II veterans, which helps) or just didn’t want to make waves. So I let it go, thinking this was his decision.

You hear this phrase all the time from people caring for their very elderly parents: “It’s like they’ve become the children, and we’re the parents.” For better or worse, it’s not so.

Our parents are adults. They have values and opinions honed over long lifetimes and make their own judgments, even if they’re not the ones we wish they’d make. We can discuss, argue or cajole, but only rarely (in the case of significant dementia, for instance) can we justify overriding them. There’s no T-shirt that says, “Because I’m the daughter, that’s why.”

That’s my standard spiel, and even now I’ll stand by it, with this proviso: One phase of moving my father into a continuing care community near me does remind me of parenting. It’s not that he needs hands-on help — nobody has to help him bathe or eat — or that he’s as resistant to suggestions as an adolescent might be.

It’s that I find myself constantly debating when to step in and when to back off as he handles this major transition. How much should I trust him, a competent guy who was handling every part of his own life until a few weeks ago, to figure out what’s important to him and act on it? And since this move has yanked him out of his familiar environs and

The Big Move

The third in a series of posts about Paula Span’s father, Murray Span, 88, and his move to a continuing care community.

- Moving Murray
- New Recruits for Team Dad

disrupted his routines, how much responsibility do I assume for smoothing the way? It's a continuing two-step, one that feels familiar.

Recently, when Dad's hearing aid broke, my role was clear. The audiologist who works with his facility would examine the device, but I had to take it to his office two towns away. Back home in southern New Jersey, where my father had visited the same audiologist for 20 years, he would have known whom to call. Even after he stopped driving last fall, he would've pressed a friend into service to drive him over. Here, in a new apartment, he was at sea.

At other junctures, the questions get trickier. Dad relishes playing cards and has been cleaning up at the Saturday night blackjack game in the community room. Why can't card games happen more than once a week, especially since the volunteer dealer is unavailable some Saturdays? Couldn't my father organize his own poker game or ask the activities director to help make that happen? Maybe, I've mused, I should talk to the activities guy myself.

I haven't, though. I've talked about it with my father, who seems reluctant to raise the issue and says he's content. The line between being a forceful advocate for your parent and being an intrusive busybody can be difficult to draw.

Besides, in these early weeks I'm discovering that I may not know as much as I think I do. Dad points out that one reason he played cards so often in the building he used to call home was that there wasn't much else for him and his friends to do. Here, besides exercise and yoga classes, he's joined a writing group, regaling the class and instructor with funny accounts from the past. He goes to discussion groups and evening movies. (He liked "The King's Speech." Of course. And "Black Swan." Go figure.) Maybe he just doesn't miss the cards so much.

Balloon volleyball -- sitting in a circle, hitting and kicking balloons back and forth -- always struck me as exactly the kind of dopey game that senior facilities come up with to fill their activity calendars. But my father finds balloon volleyball a hoot. So does his neighbor, the one with the multiple college degrees.

So I'm thinking I should just pipe down for a while and watch what happens.

Paula Span is the author of "When the Time Comes: Families With Aging Parents Share Their Struggles and Solutions."