Research Results

From Surveys and Interviews with Hundreds of Parents

By: Barbara Decker

Barbara@LiveWellAndFully.com
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Consolidated Survey Results

Parenting Adult Children with Substance Use Disorders

**Note:** The term *addict* (as used in this report) includes all individuals with a substance use disorder. The term *addict* includes individuals who are drug addicts and individuals who are alcoholics.

This report summarizes the results of 3 in-depth surveys and many follow up interviews with parents, adult children in active addiction or recovery, and recovery professionals. These surveys and interviews were done to identify what might be done to really help parents of adult children with substance use disorders.

The surveys covered:

1. Challenges faced by 164 parents of addicted / alcoholic adult children.
2. What 159 active or recovering addicts/alcoholics want parents to know.
3. What 101 recovery professionals want parents to know.

This consolidated report compiles and analyzes data from all 3 surveys so that answers from each survey would be considered in context with the other surveys.

So, let’s dig right into what I learned.

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Looking at the Raw Numbers

Adult children and recovery professionals were asked very similar questions such as:

**Adult children:** “What would you like your parent to know (or have known) about your addiction/alcoholism?”

**Recovery Professionals:** “What would you like parents to know about their adult child’s addiction/alcoholism?”

I’ve analyzed all the responses and then grouped similar responses into categories to identify what things most people responding want parents to know.

The **top 5 things** respondents want parents to know are:

1. Give me boundaries + give me love and kindness.
2. Parents: Please get help for yourself.
3. No one else can fix me and I have to be ready in order to get well.
4. This is not your fault; you did not cause my disease.
5. Addiction is a disease I have; it is not a moral failing.

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Graphs of the Top 5 Things Respondents Want Parents to Know

There are 3 graphs below. and you can see what percentage of the people who responded want parents to know each of these 5 things.

**Graph 1**: Combines the answers from both adult children and recovery professionals to show how group as a whole ranked each of the 5 things they want parents to know.

**Graph 2**: Includes just answers from adult children to show what the children want their parents to know.

**Graph 3**: Includes just answers from recovery professionals to show what professionals want parents to know.

You’ll notice that the 5 answers are identical for both surveys. You’ll also notice that some of the answers are ranked higher by one group and lower by the other group. We’ll talk about the differences in ranking a little later in this report.

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Graph 1

Answers of Adult Children & Recovery Professionals

Graph 2

Answers of Adult Children

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Graph 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Give me boundaries + give me love and kindness</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents: Please get help for yourself.</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No one else can fix me and I have to be ready in order to get well</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is not your fault; you did not cause my disease</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addiction is a disease I have; it is not a moral failing</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Answers of Recovery Professionals

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Analysis of Top 5 Results

The Oh-So-Clear 1st Place Winner: #1 Answer Is “Give me boundaries + give me love and kindness.”

Let’s break this into 2 parts and talk about boundaries first.

91% - yep almost everyone in the adult children and recovery professional groups -- talks about boundaries, enabling and the struggles parents face in deciding on the “right” boundaries for their family. (Editorial note: I personally think there is no one right answer and every family is different.)

In the same breath, almost everyone points out that what is needed is loving boundaries and kind, supportive behavior from their parents.

This Sets Up What I Call the Great Boundaries Divide

So what is the Great Boundaries Divide?

1. Adult children say they need their parents to set boundaries and not enable their addiction.

2. Recovery professionals agree with the adult children and mention this over and over as the thing they most want parents to know.

3. 65% of the parents report that setting and holding effective boundaries is one of their biggest challenges.

So, adult children and recovery professionals tell us that boundaries are, without question, essential …
And yet most parents report that they struggle to set and hold boundaries.

This difference between what the adult children **need** and what the parents **know how to do** sets up the Great Boundaries Divide.

The feelings and challenges of everyone are both understandable and natural.

As parents, our whole being tells us to be there for our children; to put a Band-Aid on their bloody knee; to hold them when they are sad; to help them through their difficulties.

*It is who we are! It is what we do!*

*It is how society often expects us to behave!*

Parents are judged badly by the uninformed all around us when we don’t behave the way society expects.

And parents often judge themselves harshly as well.

And that leads many parents to feel like they are failures as parents.

Yet....

Addicts see it differently. Addicts say that every time someone rescues them, they have one less opportunity to feel the pain of their actions.

With each rescue by a parent, they once again escape the logical consequences of their choices. And the addict loses yet another
opportunity to choose a different path for themselves ... to get into recovery.

Here are just a few of the moving and crystal-clear comments adult children make about their need for boundaries.

- “Enabling does not make it better but prolongs the path to recovery.” - Angela
- “If they are happy with you, you’re probably helping them stay active. If they’re mad at you, chances are, you’re helping save their life.” - Haley
- “Don’t love your child to death! Don’t be an enabler!” - Ashley
- “Addicts learn at the speed of pain.” - Misty
- “Be strong in what you say to them... If an addict has a soft place to land, a safe place, then nothing will ever change for them. We need to be backed into a corner and have no way out. We need to see the world crashing down on us. Rock bottom is THE MOST IMPORTANT THING.” - Aaron
- “She enabled me for too long. Allowing me in her life even after I continued to hurt her.” - Ashley
- “That no matter how much you love me it won’t stop my use. Stop enabling me You will literally love me to death! I know you think it helps but cut me off! Say no! I need tough love not coddled.” - Britteny
- “Don't provide a pillow for their fall or they will never feel rock bottom.” - Erin

Pretty darn moving, and I have hundreds more comments like these.
The problem is that boundaries are so challenging for parents. 

*It is hard for parents to decide what their individual boundaries should be.*

*It is challenging for parents to hold those boundaries when their child is in pain.*

And there is a chaos that comes with addiction... and the chaos seems to constantly change what is happening in our child’s world.

And because of this chaos, our child is constantly asking us for something more ... different ... better .... And we are being asked to respond quickly with this “help” over and over and over.

Add to that the fact that my research shows that there is very little actual help available for parents on this important topic.

- Help with a real process and system for how to set and hold effective boundaries ....
- Boundaries that are right for an individual family and the circumstances...
- Boundaries that an individual parent can live with...
- Boundaries that may just help that parent’s child choose to get well.

So it seems that effectively setting and holding powerful boundaries IS our children’s best chance for recovery. Both the adult children and the professionals are telling us this is true, clearly and loudly.

Contact: Barbara@LiveWellandFully.com

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Because of this research, ALL my work and efforts are toward building and delivering a framework, an innovative system, an experience for parents that actually **solves** for the Great Boundaries Divide and restores peace for the parents.

Now Let’s Talk About the 2nd Part of the Thing Almost Everyone Wants Parents to Know:

**Apply the Boundaries You Choose with Love and Kindness**

Both adult children and recovery professionals point out again and again that boundaries need to be offered in a kind and loving way. Adult children do not want to feel abandoned or like “trash”. Adult children need to know, really know, that when they are ready for recovery, their family will be there for them, still loving them. Adult children need to be treated with respect and without sarcasm, hurtful comments or scorn.

54% of the parents, though, list as one of their biggest challenges the fact that they can no longer communicate in an effective way with their child.

It is hard to talk to someone in active addiction. Sometimes the conversations don’t make sense. And if you are like me, you feel your child is only in contact with you when he wants something. You may feel manipulated and used.

When a parent feels manipulated and used, it is hard to communicate with love and respect. When a child is in active addiction, even if the parent tries to communicate with love and respect, their words may appear to fall on deaf ears.

Contact: [Barbara@LiveWellandFully.com](mailto:Barbara@LiveWellandFully.com)

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The addicts want parents to know that the parents’ words of love and support are being heard....

even when their child is too far in the disease of addiction to say so.

The addicts want the parents to know that they always love and value them, even when their addiction does not allow them the addict to show it. And the addicts want the parents to know that one of the addict’s greatest pains is seeing how much they hurt their parents and families.

So, the takeaway is to keep trying to communicate with love and kindness. But not to confuse love and kindness with enabling. There are books and coaches that can help us learn how to have difficult conversations with as much grace and ease as is possible in this painful situation.

Here are what some adult children have to say.

- “I would hope parents would show support, understanding and continuous unconditional love. The addict has underlying issues. Not an excuse but please show support for them. The more support they see they are getting from family, friends and community, the more strength they gain to battle their demons.” - Anonymous

- “To not insult them. Remain tactful and at same time make sure you let them know you love them regardless but will not let their actions go on and on. We're here to strengthen and conquer.” - Christine

- “Don't put them down.” - Ash

- “Words of reassurance, something as simple as "I'm proud of you" or "you can do this" meant the world to me, especially early on in my recovery.” - Alie

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“Talk to your child let them know u are there for them and that you
love them no matter what.” - Beth

So How the Heck Do You Set Effective Boundaries AND Do It
with Love and Kindness?

The real challenge we face as parents is how to deliver effective
boundaries with the necessary love and kindness. Almost every addict
and recovery professional mentioned this as the thing they most wanted
parents to know.

As the mom of an addict, the challenge for me was how to actually set
boundaries which do not enable and that I could live with - boundaries
that fit with my image of what a loving mom does or how that mom
behaves. And then how to deliver and hold those boundaries with both
love and respect.

Doing both at the same time can be a real challenge when the adult child
is in active addiction. It took me 7 years of intensive work to find my way
all the way through this dilemma. It took years to get to my own place of
peace. It took years to be able to move forward with my own life,
independent of what was happening in my son’s life. And it took me
years to learn and believe that setting and holding --- with love ---
boundaries that are right for me is the only area in which I have any
power at all.

A full 65% of the parents report that they are in constant pain and feel
powerless to help their child. I was a member of that group for a very
long time.

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Here is a sample of what people wrote about boundaries and love. Of what often felt to me like a contradiction. The **contradiction of boundaries with love**.

- “Love your child from a distance. Let them know that you can not enable them but that you will be there when they are ready to get help.” - Jenna
- “Don’t give up on your child. Be there for them but don’t enable. Don’t give them money to support the addiction. Don’t demean them or make them feel lesser than.” - Anonymous
- “Don’t enable them but be their support system. They need to know they are loved and cared for. That it’s okay they messed up, it can be fixed.” - Abigail
- “Not judging me and but not enabling me either.” - Amber
- “They told me to call when I was ready to get help, but not to call for anything else. My parents did exactly what I needed.” - Dakotah
- “LOVE but do not enable by LOVE I mean no judgments no hatred no anger just tell them you love them and pray for them but if their lifestyle is harming you, you have to protect yourself by not being a part of any longer and they have a choice to make and if ever they choose love and family you’re there waiting.” - Angela
- “My mom let me face my consequences. "Tough Love" as they call it. Without that I really don't know that I would still be here today. When I got clean she helped me out a lot to get back on my feet. She’s now one of my biggest supporters.” - Bonnie
- “Let them know you love them. But you won't help them kill themselves. As hard as it may seem, sometimes you must step back and not help them when they are still using. You can’t force an addict to take help when they don’t want it yet. Their pain and
misery has to be great enough that they want the change. Do nothing to make their lives easier.” - Candi

- “I appreciate my mother always being there and supporting me, but my father’s tough love was a lot more helpful.” - Chelsea

- “Be supportive but not enabling.” - Angel

- “Never turned against me. Loved me all the while. Refused to bail me out of jail.” - Caitlin

- “Loved me from afar.” - Crystal

- “My mother finally started to tell me no and stuck by it, no matter how hateful or manipulative I became. She got to a point when she let me know she loved me enough to not enable me in killing myself. She protected herself from me, shortly after she & my family left me alone, refusing to allow me to torment them any longer, I chose to get help.” - Anonymous

- “Stop enabling the child. Show them love, but know that it’s ultimately up to them to get help. Sometimes it’s hard, but enabling an addict only adds to the problem.” - Adam

#2 Answer Is:

“Parents: Please get help for yourself.”

Both recovery professionals and adult children encourage parents to get help for themselves. To find support groups.... To consider Al-Anon or Nar-Anon ... To consider therapy....

And this all makes sense. For 2 reasons.

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Reason 1

Being the parent of an addict can be isolating. A third of parents report isolation as one of their biggest challenges. Recovery professionals think this number is higher and under reported by parents. I tend to agree. I know a lot of parents who have kept their child’s addiction a secret for many years, even from close family members.

Having the support of a group of like-minded people, those who know and understand what you are going through as a parent, is crucial.

Having the support of such a group was what allowed me to move from constant pain and worry to a place of relative peace.

I didn’t want to join a group.

A person I trust kept insisting that I join. And I’m very glad I did.

Because it turns out that I learn more from listening to the challenges of the other parents and thinking about options for them than I ever did thinking about my own challenges. The other parents, in turn, offer such value to me week after week.

Yep, I continue to go to my group every week I am in town. Going to my group is a gift I give myself.

Reason 2

Addiction is a family disease. This doesn’t mean that the family causes the addiction. It doesn't mean that the family can cure the addiction.
It does mean that addiction is a disease that affects the entire family. It also means that all any of us can do is to look at ourselves and our actions. Because we can only change ourselves. That’s simply a basic truth.

I find it interesting that a full 77% of recovery professionals emphasize the importance of parents finding their own help and support.

This answer ranks 2nd as the most important thing recovery professionals want the parents to know.

And 39% of the adult children also ask their parents to get help and support for themselves. The addicts’ report that it is painful for them because they can’t help their beloved parents through this situation. The parents’ suffering weighs heavily on the addicts.

I include community and group in my work because healing really only happens in community.

And because for many of us, our current peer groups and families are unable to truly understand and ill-equipped to support us.

Let’s face it. Until you’ve been here, you just can’t understand. Parents feel shame (more on that a little later…), and often friends and family feed the feeling many parents have of not having been “good enough”.

Here are few related comments from the survey:

- “Join a parents’ support group, Al-Anon and attend open AA meetings to help you gain an understanding about addiction and freedom for yourself.”

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● “Getting yourself help will improve your relationship with them and your ability to properly support them.” - Sara

● “Get in a group that understands.” - Pat

● “Find support systems and use them. Research and find out all you can.” - Pam

● “It takes a village to properly treat substance use disorder and engaging with treatment professionals is incredibly important. Talk with people they trust and develop a support system. Learn the language of recovery and if confused about recovery talk with professionals.” - Matthew

● “Join a support group.” - Lori

● “Having your own support group and trusted individual(s) that you can bounce things off of, it absolutely important. You must put your own gas mask on first before you can appropriately assist a loved one with theirs. Get their own support. Be open with people they trust about what they are going through. Addiction is a family disease and will tear at the seams of the family unit if it is kept a secret.” - Katie

● “Find help for yourselves.” - Brittany

● “Gather support around yourself, get a team to be with you and to help. You can’t do this alone. Don’t be ashamed.” - Anne

● “Be accountable for your OWN mental health and do what you must to become a qualified support system and set a good example.” - Donna

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#3 Answer Is:

“No one else can fix me and I have to be ready in order to get well.”

Both the adult children and the recovery professionals place this answer 3rd. But this is so very hard for parents to accept.

If you are anything like me, you go into “fix it’ mode. You figure if you search high and low ...turn over every idea and stone that comes your way, never giving up... You will find the magic way to “fix” your child. That magic does not exist.

94% of parents report that they worry all the time about their addicted child.

94%!

That’s a huge number.

That worry, though, is not doing anyone any good, because the parent cannot force the addict into recovery. Constant worry just sucks the joy and life out of the parents. Constant worry consumes the parent’s time and most of the parent’s waking hours. Constant worry interferes with sleep and the parent’s health and well-being.

The survey responses do identify 2 things parents can do.

1. Deliver and hold effective boundaries with love and kindness and
2. Get their own help.

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The survey data shows that these are really the only productive uses of the parent’s time and energy.

Survey respondents say it best.

- “Just know that sobriety is a choice that an addict must make on their own.” - Jessica
- “When they are ready, they will seek help.” - Jewel
- “You can make things easier or harder. I’m sorry and still love you but I am not myself when using.” - Madeline
- “It was not until I was ready to do it for me is when it worked.” - Rachel
- “That they can't save the addict. I had to make the decision on my own to stop drinking.” - Silky
- “If they're not ready, nothing is gonna help.” - Dana
- “That the patient needs to put in the effort. It’s hard to force recovery on a patient it needs to come from within.” - Ethan
- “Your child has to want to change first and foremost...” - Leigh
- “You are not responsible for their recovery. You can’t work harder than they do.” - Michele

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Many adult children speak elegantly and at length about the fact that their addiction is not their parent’s fault. I asked some recovery professionals why this answer ranked lower on the professionals’ survey and got 2 reasons.

As recovery professionals, they think that parents feeling responsible is rather ridiculous. They know that parents didn’t cause this disease, any more than parents cause cancer or diabetes. Unless a professional works mostly with the families of addicts, he or she may not witness the pain these parents experience, day after day, believing they are the cause of the problem and that they are failures as parents. This pain is very real and is experienced by at least half of the parents. But understanding the facts does not make the pain disappear. Getting past the pain is a process, helped when the parents have support.

In the survey, the question asked is: “What would you most like your parents to know?” And often the answer is these exact words: “It is not their fault.”

The adult children elaborate in a number of ways.

Several of the adult children mention that knowing that their parents “carry this guilt” is horrible and makes the child’s recovery more difficult or painful.
This disease strikes all kinds of families, from the finest and most loving to the worst. It is indiscriminate in the devastation it causes to both the child and the parent.

***Parents - please know this. Parents - please believe it. Because it is absolutely true.***

This is not your fault. You did not cause this.

Listen to what the adult children had to say:

- “That it wasn’t their fault there was nothing they could have done.” - Alison
- “Their parenting had nothing to do with what happened. They were great parents and should be proud of how well they raised me.” - Abbey
- “It’s not your fault...regardless of what I went through growing up my own actions are the reason I become addicted and I never want them to feel blame.” - Alicia
- “It’s not your fault. You did not fail me.” - Tracey
- “Most of all I want them to know that it’s not their fault and they did an amazing job raising me.” - Lindsay
- “It’s not their fault they didn’t fail as parents I made bad choices on my own.” - Mark
- “That it isn't their fault; they have tried every single thing they could think of. That I love them more than I love myself.” - Olivia
- “That it isn't their fault. I had a great childhood with great parents. ... I had everything I needed and most of what I wanted. Addiction

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Can affect anyone. It had nothing to do with their parenting.” - Rachel

- “That it started with her but she isn’t to blame…” - Nicole
- “My addiction has absolutely nothing to do with you as a parent or as a person. You didn’t fail so stop thinking you did.” - Kristin
- “That they have nothing to do with the choices we make. That they have no reason to take on any guilt for our decisions.” - Jordan

#5 Answer Is:
“Addiction is a disease I have; it is not a moral failing.”

Interestingly, 53% of recovery professionals want parents to know this, followed by 29% of the adult children.

Addiction is a disease that can strike anyone. There are lots of factors. And like with any disease, recovery is possible.

But unlike most diseases, addiction is a disease of the mind. This makes recovery harder since the addict’s mind is fooling them. It fools them by telling them things that are just not true.

In addiction, your child looks like the person you love. But what you are experiencing is the addiction. The person him or herself is still there - hidden somewhere deep beneath the addiction.

Just like it’s not the parent’s fault, it is also not the addict’s fault that the addict has this disease. It is the addict’s responsibility to manage his/her
disease and to choose either recovery or staying in the disease. But it is not the addict’s fault that they became addicted.

The **addict does not cause their disease** any more than the parent does.

- “Don’t give up on them because addiction is very powerful so if it takes them 100 times to get better know that they really are trying. It’s harder
- than you know to have a brain that tells you lies and can keep you isolated even when you so desperately want help and freedom from drugs and alcohol.” - Martha
- “That if I could’ve quit I would’ve sooner. It changed my whole core being, I loved them as best I could.” - Chloe
- “That I did feel horrible for the things I was doing while I was using. And that I was sick, my mind was not in the right place. Who I was while I was using drugs and alcohol is not who I am. That’s a whole different person. A sick, consumed, sad, lonely, scared person.” - Sarah
- “It is a disease. I would never have put my family through what I did because of lack of love. If my love for them was enough to get sober I would have a long time before I did.” - Dakotah
- “Addicts are not bad people and they love their family, they are sick and driven by cravings which is not always if ever a nice picture/ or the person they love.” - Amy
- “Also despite what some people believe the problem is not a specific substance it’s addiction.” - Anthony
- “Addiction is a disease and they can't help the feeling of urges they get.” = Holly

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“Your child isn’t well. Their brain needs healing. It’s easier for them to find another fix than to find the help they need... When they relapse it spirals fast into a worst beast from before. They don't want to be there. They are scared.” - Pam

Parents Who Want to Help Versus Parents Who Do Help

There is one more very interesting statistic. Professionals were asked:

What percentage of the parents you encounter WANT TO BE truly helpful to their adult child in that child’s recovery journey?

AND

What percentage of the parents you encounter ARE truly helpful to their adult child in that child’s recovery journey?

65% of parents want to be truly helpful. 32% are

... according to the recovery professionals.

The adult children themselves were asked to rate how helpful their parent was on a scale of 1-5. 1 is the most helpful. The adult children rated their parents’ helpfulness at an average of 2.4.

I am convinced that the difference between 32% and 65% is almost entirely because parents don’t know how to help. Today, there is a lot of help available for the addicts (when they are ready to accept it.) But there still isn’t much help for parents who want to do the best they can for their adult child ... and simply don’t know how.

Contact: Barbara@LiveWellandFully.com

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Final Thoughts

Please know there is the possibility of recovery for every child. There is always hope.

Many of us have seen people in long-term addiction choose recovery. The reasons for the bottom each person chooses are impossible to find and define. The addicts themselves usually don’t know what caused their switch to flip and how they ended up ready to embrace recovery.

As a parent, it will have to be enough to know that our child may come back to you- and that there are things you can do to help yourself, which may ultimately help your child along his/her path to recovery.

The things we can do may not be the things we know how to do. But we can learn.

And we can heal.

It is my hope that my work will be useful to the parents of addicts.

All 5 of these things survey respondents want parents to know are basic truths about addiction as I understand it. I’ll share more on these topics in later emails and in programs I develop.

1. Give me boundaries + give me love and kindness.
2. Parents: Please get help for yourself.
3. No one else can fix me and I have to be ready in order to get well.
4. This is not your fault; you did not cause my disease.
5. Addiction is a disease I have; it is not a moral failing.

Barbara Decker

Contact: Barbara@LiveWellandFully.com

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