



**40 | 70**

## The 40-70 Rule

A Guide to Conversation Starters for  
Boomers and Their Senior Loved Ones

## Introduction to the 40-70 Rule

This guide is designed to help adult children and their ageing parents deal with those sensitive life topics that often make conversations difficult. How do you talk with your mum and dad about driving, dating and independence? And when do you start?

Based on research and experience, Home Instead Senior Care recommends that the earlier these conversations begin the better. The “40-70 Rule” means that if you are 40, or your parents are 70, it’s time to start talking – at least about certain senior topics.

This guide features a series of situations followed by possible responses for some of the most awkward senior subjects. Sooner is better, before a crisis occurs. But it’s never too late to start. These examples cover situations that can be addressed early, as well as those that have reached a crisis level.

A startling piece of the research revealed that nearly one-third of adults have a major communication obstacle with their parents that stems from continuation of the parent-child role. The fact that many of these families are still in a parent-child rather than a peer-to-peer role makes these conversations particularly difficult.

A list of communication tips provided in this guide is intended to help adult children of ageing parents surmount this obstacle and pave the way for better communication and a more fulfilling relationship.

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For more information about the 40-70 Rule visit [homeinstead.com.au](http://homeinstead.com.au)

## Seven Tips to Help Boomer Children Communicate With Their Ageing Parents

**Get started.** If you’re 40 or your parents are 70, it’s time to start observing and gathering information carefully and thoughtfully. Don’t reach a conclusion from one observation and decide on a solution until you have gathered information with an open mind and talked with your parents.

**Talk it out.** Approach your parents with a conversation. Discuss what you’ve observed and ask your parents what they think is going on. If your parents acknowledge the situation, ask what they think would be good solutions. If your parents don’t recognise a problem, use concrete examples to support your case.

**Sooner is best.** Talk sooner, rather than later when a crisis has occurred. If you know your loved one has poor eyesight or has trouble driving at night, begin to address those issues before a problem arises.

**Forget the baby talk.** Remember you are talking to an adult, not a child. Patronising speech or baby talk will put older adults on the defensive and convey a lack of respect for them. Put yourself in your parent’s shoes and think of how you would want to be addressed in the situation.

**Maximise independence.** Always try to move toward solutions that provide the maximum amount of independence for an older person. Look for answers that optimise strengths and compensate for problems. For instance, if your loved ones need help at home, look for ways that can help them maintain their strengths. Professional caregiving services, such as those offered by Home Instead Senior Care, provide assistance in a number of areas. Or find friends who can help.

**Be aware of the whole situation.** If your dad dies and soon afterward your mum’s house seems to be in disarray, it’s likely to stem from a lack of social support and the loss of a life-long relationship. Make sure that your mum has friends and a social life.

**Ask for help.** Many of the issues of ageing can be solved by providing parents with the support they need to continue to maintain their independence. Resources such as Home Instead Senior Care, Government Agencies and local senior centers can help provide those solutions.

## Conversation Starters . . . For Sensitive Senior Subjects

### ■ When Health Changes Lifestyles

*Your 70-year-old widowed mother has just been diagnosed with macular degeneration, a disease that causes deterioration of eyesight. How do you begin a conversation with her about the possible ramifications of this disease on her life?*



Many seniors in this situation might begin the conversation with family themselves. If not, then it would be good to think about her personal circumstances and important areas to address. For example, transportation is probably the most immediate issue. Approach the conversation with the

goal of trying to resolve this one issue, rather than multiple issues. Timing is the key. There are rarely urgent deadlines that have to be met immediately – give yourself and your parent time to think about issues. Your mum would likely be receptive to a conversation that begins: “Let’s figure out a plan for how you can get around town if you no longer feel safe driving.”

**Research:** Nearly one-third (31 percent) of Baby Boomers said their biggest communication obstacle with their ageing parents is continuation of the parent-child roles that emerged in childhood, making discussion of sensitive issues even more difficult.

### ■ Did Dad Hit a Light Pole?

*A neighbour of your 83-year-old dad has called to tell you he saw your father back his car into a light pole. What do you say?*



If the damage is visible, you could ask, “Hey Dad, what happened to the car?” Or you could bring up the phone call from his neighbour. “Fred next door called and said he saw you run your car into the light pole.” This is an example of a situation that calls for more general observation. Take the opportunity to drive with your parent. Even a short drive would help you gauge your dad’s skills and deficits.

For instance, an older adult who consciously reduces driving at night because of vision issues or who drives a little slower to account for reaction time is probably safe. On the other hand, an 83-year-old who insists on driving busy highways at night while doing 100kph is probably in need of immediate intervention. Then gear your comments accordingly. If you’re concerned that your dad is unsafe on the roads, make his safety and that of others your focus. “Dad, I’m worried that you’re no longer safe on the roads and that others could be at risk as well.”

### ■ When the House Is a Mess

*You find that your 77-year-old mother’s house is often in disarray when you visit. You believe it’s time for her to make a change in her living arrangement. What do you say?*

Observation and careful attention to the problem should be your first course of action. Avoid diagnosing a problem and deciding on a solution quickly. Approach your mother with a sense of working together to find a solution rather than telling her what to do.



The specific circumstances – such as financial constraints – may be relevant. Is the problem simply that your mother is physically challenged by strenuous housework or is she deteriorating mentally? Does she just need help tidying up around the house or are other aspects of her personal care, such as bathing, going downhill?

**Research:** The most difficult topic for adult children to discuss with their ageing parents was that they have to leave their home. That conversation was a problem for more than half (53 percent) of those who were still in the parent-child role, as well as more than one-third (35 percent) who didn’t have that communication obstacle.

Assuming that the problem is physical where vacuuming or bending is becoming an issue, begin the conversation with an offer: “Mum, what do you say we find someone to help you with the heavy stuff, like vacuuming? It will be my treat.”

Seniors are often very willing to accept help around the house.

And most areas have community services and resources such as cleaning services and companies like Home Instead Senior Care that can help.

## ■ A Senior Moment or Something More?

*You've just stopped by your parents' house and for the second time in a month, notice that your 70-year-old mother has forgotten the name of a close friend. Is it Alzheimer's disease or dementia, a senior moment or just a passing phase? More importantly, how do you find out?*



**Research:** A parent's cognitive condition was a topic that 50% of Baby Boomers wanted to know more about.

Make sure you consider your mum's history and personality so that you can determine if this is a change. Some people have always been bad with names, but if your mum is forgetting a close friend's name and you notice signs of disorientation, you might say: "You know Mum, perhaps you should see

a doctor and get checked out. I'm sure it's nothing, but it would really put my mind at ease if you'd let a doctor make sure your memory is O.K." Such a conversation starter focuses on the positive not the negative.

## ■ Sibling Communication

*After finding many of the light bulbs blown in your 86-year-old parents' house, you believe that they're beginning to need more assistance. As the oldest of five children in the family, how do you approach your siblings? What resources can you tap into?*



Siblings can be a good reality check. You might say to a brother or sister, "I think that Mum and Dad may be having problems changing their light bulbs. Have you noticed anything?" But it's important not to get involved in a group-think cycle where the siblings all start seeing problems and building grand disaster scenarios.

If a parent needs a little more help around the house, that shouldn't result in siblings picking out a nursing home and putting their parents' house on the market. Perhaps all they need is a little extra assistance. Go to your Home Instead Senior Care office or Government Agency for resources that can help.

**Research:** Nearly three-quarters (71 percent) of respondents said it would be helpful to involve siblings in talking with parents, while nearly half (49 percent) said seeking counsel from a senior-care professional would be useful.

## ■ When Dad Starts to Date

*Since your mother died a year ago, your 77-year-old father has started dating a widowed family friend. You'd like to know more about what's going on, but how do you begin the conversation?*



If you want to introduce the topic, a gentle inquiry like the following would be fine: "So it seems that you've been seeing quite a bit of 'Fran' recently." After this, you should probably see whether your Dad wants to share additional information. If he doesn't, that's his prerogative.

One exception would be if you have some information that there is abuse or exploitation in the scenario. For instance, if you sense that your Dad's love interest may be taking advantage of him financially, some additional probing might be justified, depending on the specifics.

If the friend moves in with your Dad and a lot of new things appear around the house, which don't fit your dad's style, you might ask, "This doesn't look like your kind of thing, Dad. Did you buy this?" Otherwise, be happy that your dad has a girlfriend and don't force him to disclose more than he's comfortable telling you.

**Research:** Nearly half (47%) of adult children are not very or not at all comfortable speaking to Mum or Dad about their parent's romantic life.

## About the Research

Home Instead Senior Care research forms the foundation for this guide. The company interviewed 1,500 U.S. and Canadian adult children of ageing parents, asking them about their relationships with their parents, and how they handle discussing sensitive topics with these older adults.\* The scenarios and responses were developed by Home Instead Senior Care, based on real-life experiences, and with input from communication expert and author Jake Harwood, Ph.D., from the University of Arizona.

Jake Harwood is professor of communication and former director of the Graduate Program in Gerontology at the University of Arizona. His research focuses on communication and ageing.

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\*Survey Methodology: 1,000 telephone interviews were completed in the U.S. (sampling error of +/-3.1 percent at a 95 percent confidence level) and 500 interviews were completed in Canada, excluding Quebec (sampling error of +/-4.4 percent at a 95 percent confidence level). Data analysis was performed by the Boomer Project of Richmond, Virginia, USA

# About Home Instead Senior Care

Home Instead Senior Care is the world's largest provider of non-medical home care and companionship services for seniors, with more than 750 independently owned and operated franchises in the United States, Canada, Japan, Portugal, Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Taiwan, Spain, Switzerland and Germany. Non-medical services include companionship, meal preparation, medication reminders, light housekeeping and escort for errands and shopping. More than 40,000 CAREGivers are screened, trained, insured and have successfully passed thorough criminal background checks.

Services are available at home or in care facilities for a few hours per week, or as many as 24 hours a day, seven days a week, including holidays. Family members can't always be there for senior parents and relatives, so Home Instead CAREGivers are the next best thing.

Home Instead CAREGivers complete a multi-phased safety and caregiving education program. This features case studies, senior illness information, stimulating activities, nutritional recipes, and tips for coping with stress. In addition, Home Instead Senior Care offers an industry-leading Alzheimer's training program to CAREGivers.



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