

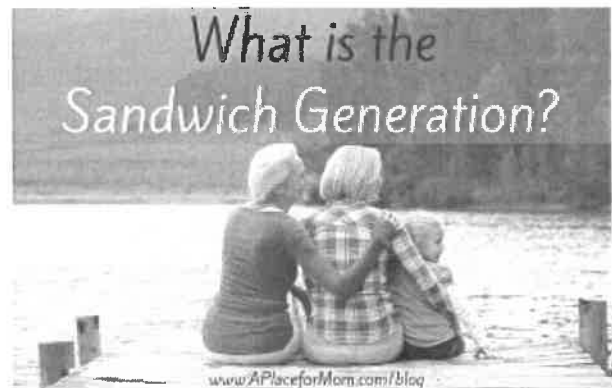
What is the Sandwich Generation?

aplaceformom.com/blog/10-05-15-what-is-the-sandwich-generation/

By Dana Larsen

October 5, 2015

Tackling both elder care and childcare at once requires fortitude and patience. Despite the tremendous pressures faced by those with these dual obligations, millions of Americans have assumed this admirable role. Learn more about these caregivers who are a part of the Sandwich Generation.



Sandwich Generation Caregivers

Even if you've never heard the phrase "sandwich generation," chances are fairly good that if you're reading this article, the term describes you.

In the United States, from 1900-2000, life expectancy increased from 47-76 years, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Since humans are living longer, the 21st century has produced a large population of older adults, creating a need for more caregivers.

Family members, predominantly female family members, have provided the majority of care to their aging loved ones. Today, there is a generation of middle-aged adults, known as the Sandwich Generation, who are caught between the demands of child rearing in addition to providing care to their aging parents for these reasons:

- **Delayed parenting** — A new norm in today's society of couples starting families in their mid-to late-30s
- **Increased life span** — People are living longer in the 21st century as a result of better healthcare and technology

Sandwich Generation Defined

Sandwich generation is a term that seems extremely accurate and descriptive once you understand the context for which it's used. So what exactly does the term mean?

The sandwich generation is a generation of people who care for their aging parents while supporting their own children.

Social worker Dorothy Miller created the term “sandwich generation” back in 1981, and was originally referring to younger women in their 30s-40s who were taking care of both their children and parents. Then, journalist Carol Abaya continued to study and expose what the term means as America ages in present day.

Abaya breaks down the sandwich generation scenarios even further:

1. **Traditional:** Those sandwiched between aging parents who need care and/or help and their own children.
2. **Club Sandwich:** Those in their 50s-60s sandwiched between aging parents, adult children and grandchildren, or those in their 30s-40s, with young children, aging parents and grandparents.
3. **Open Faced:** Anyone else involved in elder care.

Merriam-Webster and Oxford English officially added the term to their dictionaries in 2006, since the role has become even more commonplace and recognized across mainstream culture. So while sandwich generation caregiver may sound like a quirky word, the trend is becoming a phenomenon in aging America.

Sandwich Generation Characteristics

There are many emotions that go along with being a sandwich generation caregiver as stress, financial burden and burnout can be part of the job. However, there is a flip side of optimism for those with the title. In fact, Pew Research reports that of the caregivers who look after both their kids and their aging parents, “31% report being very happy with their lives, and an additional 52% say they are pretty happy.” Happiness rates are nearly the same among adults who are not part of the sandwich generation as “28% are very happy, and 51% are pretty happy.”

These statistics show that, in some cases, having both children and aging parents in the house can foster closer family bonds between the generations. It’s common for people to feel a greater sense of self worth and accomplishment when providing for their loved ones.

But, Pew Research also notes that adults who are part of the sandwich generation — specifically, those who have a living parent age 65 or older and are either raising a child under age 18 or supporting a grown child — are pulled in many directions. Not only do many provide care and financial support to their parents and their children, but nearly 38% say both their grown children and their parents rely on them for emotional support.

Sandwich Generation Demographic

Caring for an aging parent is an immense challenge, and one of the most profound tasks we can take on in our lives. The same can be said about raising children. So who are the people who fill this heroic role?

The sandwich generation is full of people from many different backgrounds and ethnicities, but there are trends. Here are some of the demographics, according to the Census Bureau:

- Sandwich generation members are mostly middle-aged, or between the ages of 40-59
- 19% of the members are younger than 40, and 10% are age 60 and older
- Men and women are both members, although the caregivers are predominantly women
- Married adults are more likely than unmarried adults to be sandwiched between their children and parents: 36% of those who are married fall into this group and 13% of those who are unmarried fall into this group
- More affluent adults, or those with annual household incomes of \$100,000 or more, are more likely than less affluent adults to be in the sandwich generation: 43% of those with incomes of \$100,000 or more are affected, compared to 25% of those with incomes between \$30,000-\$100,000 a year
- Hispanics are the biggest ethnic population in the sandwich generation situation: 31% of Hispanic adults have a parent age 65 or older and a dependent child, whereas approximately 24% of whites and 21% of blacks are sandwich generation caregivers

Sandwich Generation Issues

Tackling both elder care and childcare at once is indeed impressive. But that doesn't mean it hasn't taken its toll on its sandwich generation caregivers. In fact, there are many sandwich generation issues to report. Some of the most common reported are the following:

- **Stress**
- **Financial Hardship**
- **Depression**

Multigenerational caregivers experience high levels of stress, and many report simply not having enough time in the day to accomplish their multitude of responsibilities. Furthermore, Sandwich Generation members often see a negative impact on their careers and finances.

A survey sent out by A Place for Mom found that 23% of multigenerational caregivers would consider leaving their job all together, and a further 31% would attempt to reduce their hours, which can negatively impact salary. One caregiver, 41-year-old Kim Hunter, noted:

“Ten years ago, I would not have guessed my mother would live with us. We just didn't think about what was down the road. The experience is equal parts challenging and rewarding. On one hand I am juggling work with the needs of both my mom and my kids, and it's tough financially. On the flipside, my children are getting to know their grandma in a special way while I am getting to know my mom on a different, deeper level.”

Sandwich Generation Stress

Being a sandwich generation caregiver definitely requires a delicate balancing act, and stress is simply part of the job. Sandra Tsing Loh, author of “The Madwoman in the Volvo: My Year of Raging Hormones,” columnist for The Atlantic, and sandwich generation caregiver, discusses some of the challenges faced by sandwich generation caregivers:

“A lot of women I know, they have these amazing superpowers. When they’re on, they can do the work of ten people. The problem is, occasionally they hit the bottom of the wave, and wake up on Saturday morning without the strength to reach over for their reading glasses to read the paper.”

The constant multitasking can be exhausting for caregivers. As Loh points out, many of them are women are suffering from the triple-Ms, or “middle aged mothers in menopause,” when biologically women lose their nurturing hormones and no longer want to take care of people. It becomes physically exhausting and mentally challenging to maintain the balancing act, and stress is one of the byproducts.

Learning how to tackle stress is a necessity for sandwich generation caregivers, which is why it is crucial for caregivers to take care of themselves by getting help from a family member, hiring respite care, or having regular breaks from caregiving. Lowering the bar is crucial for survival. Loh notes, “If you can get through even a quarter of the items on the to-do list on a Monday morning, you’re amazing... It’s hard to ask for help sometimes, because you think you failed. You’re blaming yourself. It helps to have a friend you can call and say, ‘I am terrible, I am crying today, I don’t know what’s wrong with me,’ and have a real conversation with them. And a regular class or luncheon with friends is great to get your mind of responsibilities.”

Everyone needs a break. But sandwich generation caregivers need to remember to take care of themselves first, otherwise they are no good to their children or parents because they are suffering from burnout. Taking care of you first is the golden rule of caregiving. Sometimes seeing a family counselor, psychiatrist or doctor is necessary for those who are sandwich generation caregivers.

We have also compiled a list of helpful books for caregivers for helpful tips, insight and information.

Tackling Finances as a Sandwich Generation Caregiver

Members of the sandwich generation may not have anticipated being in the position of helping to provide for their elderly parents. Whether the recession, lack of financial planning, or a combination of factors affected your parents’ bank account, there are creative senior care funding options.

Selling the family home, using investments, re-budgeting or using Veterans’ or government aid are just a few of the ways to help finance senior care. Discover how to prioritize and plan family financing ahead of time, and get financial tips for sandwich generation caregivers. It’s important for sandwich generation caregivers to put themselves first and not sacrifice their own financial well being for their children or parents.

Sandwich Generation Statistics

As America ages, more and more people are becoming multi-generational caregivers. According to National Alliance for Caregiving, 9.3 million Americans are a part of the sandwich generation today, and that number is expected to exponentially increase over the next 20 years as the baby boomer population gets older.

Here are some other interesting statistics, courtesy of Pew Research Center, to better understand the sandwich generation:

- Nearly half, or 47%, of adults in their 40s-50s have a parent age 65 or older and are either raising a young child or financially supporting a grown child (age 18 or older)
- About one-in-seven middle-aged adults, or 15%, is providing financial support to both an aging parent and a child
- Roughly half, or 48%, of adults ages 40-59 have provided some financial support to at least one grown child in the past year, with 27% providing the primary support
- About one-in-five middle-aged adults, or 21%, have provided financial support to a parent age 65 or older in the past year
- Among all adults with at least one parent age 65 or older, 30% say their parent or parents need help to handle their affairs or care for themselves
- Among all adults with a living parent age 65 or older, 35% say that their parent or parents frequently rely on them for emotional support and 33% say their parents sometimes rely on them for emotional support

The statistics are proof that sandwich generation caregivers are an extraordinary group of people. Every caregiving situation and relationship is different and requires its own formula for day-to-day living.

Family support and financial planning are crucial for every sandwich generation caregiver. It's important to reach out for help, when needed, and doctors, family counselors, psychiatrists and caregiving support groups are all excellent resources. A Place for Mom also has expert senior living advisors to answer a wide range of questions about elder care for each families' unique situation.

What are some of the struggles you've faced as a sandwich generation caregiver? We'd love to hear your stories in the comments below.

Related Articles:

- Laugh a Little, Ditch the "Shoulds": Sandra Tsing Loh on Being a Sandwich Generation Caregiver
- Honoring Caregivers: July is Sandwich Generation Month
- How to Recognize Signs It's Time for Assisted Living

Copyright 2019 A Place for Mom, Inc. All rights reserved.

