



On Parenting

Who needs parents when you've got Siri?

By Melissa T. Shultz June 17



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Whom do you call when you have a practical question? Ask teens and 20-somethings, and they're likely to say *Siri*. Ask middle-aged moms like me, and we're likely to say, well ... *Siri*.

Once upon a time, I might have called my mother with a question about how to remedy an allergic reaction, or my father about the cost of a car repair. And when I did, I'd settle in for the long answer regardless of how busy I was. After all, I had the latest technology of the '80s and '90s — a home phone that never ran out of juice and a very long phone cord that allowed me to multitask. The only maintenance required was to untwist the cord now and again.

I began this phone-calling ritual when I was a teenager, then took it up a notch when I had children. There was something to be learned from these conversations, regardless of whether my folks actually had expertise in the subject and regardless of whether I agreed with their advice and point of view.

Over the years, as the Internet became the new portable version of the encyclopedias my family once collected volume by volume, I made less of these calls.

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I'm not alone. Today, the role of chief question-answerer once reserved for parents and encyclopedias has been assumed by the digital assistant Siri, or some version of her. In fact, Siri gets more than 1 billion requests a week, and Google itself, which Siri is fond of calling upon, processes about 40,000 search queries every second.

That's a lot of searching. But from where I sit, something's getting lost in the translation.

I resisted using Siri initially, certain that she was created for young people who wanted a shortcut to everything. But eventually, she hooked me with her 24/7 access to YouTube, Google, you name it. Never mind that she's somewhat hard of hearing and often gets the question wrong — so do real parents.

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There was a time when my father sent me articles by snail mail. He'd tear out a section of the newspaper and write *Missy* across the top, with an arrow drawn to the story he wanted me to read. When it arrived, I would invariably call him to talk about the story or another unrelated question, such as: Who was the male lead in *The Kid from Brooklyn?* (Danny Kaye.) Now Siri makes the call to answer the question. But it's not the same. It's not personal. With my father, I'd learn how he once nearly drove off a cliff in a snowstorm when he delivered films to movie houses in the 1950s.



If I called my mother to ask how big a roast I'd need to feed six people the next day, she'd tell me, and then ask who was coming for dinner, and perhaps toss in what classes she was attending. I might even learn that she tripped and fell that day, something I wouldn't have known had I not called to ask about meat. (And yes, this actually happened.)

Recently, our whole family attended a wedding. Rather than ask their father to remind them how to tie their ties — something he would have loved to do just for the chance to connect with them — our sons (aged 20 and 23) asked Siri instead. Last year, when our youngest cooked a chicken dinner for the first time in his apartment at college, he called Siri, not me, for directions. I was, admittedly, a tad wounded. Don't get me wrong: We still get a few calls of the *My car battery is dead, now what?* variety, but not so much. And for the record, I'm all for them figuring things out on their own. I could have figured out most everything I called my parents about. But that was never really the point.

I can't blame it entirely on Siri. It's search engines in general, and since they help me research the stories I write, I shouldn't bite the virtual hand that feeds me. This technology brings the world to us and makes us smarter. It also doesn't judge when we ask stupid questions. For young people who are trying to problem-solve without their parents knowing what's *really* going on, there are pluses, no doubt. But if you turn to a *machine* parent every time, you won't get a chance to know your real parents nearly as well.

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Siri, or some version of Siri, will no doubt outlive us all. But the opportunity to have a conversation with someone I love, someone who is trying to work through an issue — that's only for a little while.

So what's the solution to this shifting dynamic? I'll ask Siri. Maybe she'll have an answer.

Melissa T. Shultz is the author of [From Mom to Me Again: How I Survived My First Empty Nest Year and Reinvented the Rest of My Life](#). You can follow her on Twitter [@MelissatShultz](#).

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Wistful, nostalgic. Personally, I wish I had Siri when I was growing up, to answer questions on things my parents knew nothing about. Instead, I had to spend hours in the library! (Well, maybe that wasn't so bad after all.)

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