



# Acting Your SMARTS

Advice for the Caregiver

## Who gets Mom and Dad's things?

By Kari Berit

I remember peeking in the china cabinet before my mom died in 2002, checking out what she had for dishes and collectibles that I would possibly want. What I found were Post-It® notes on various items, identifying in Mom's handwriting who should get what – or at least who she wanted to receive a specific item.

I never talked about it, either one-on-one with Mom or with my family. In that, I suspect we're normal. Why don't we talk about an issue as basic as who Mom and Dad want to get their stuff when they die? Because it's too close to talking about their death.

Nothing I've seen suggests there's a norm for how families handle the issue of who gets Mom and Dad's stuff. Sometimes, the parents decide on their own. Sometimes, I'm sure, it's done collaboratively. Mostly, I'd be willing to guess, the kids have to figure it out as a part of settling up the estate. I've certainly seen

that far more often than any other alternative. It's understandable: We don't talk about passing on possessions because it's too close to talking about our parents passing on, and death is a subject our culture mostly avoids at any cost. That's too bad, because end-of-life planning is such an important thing to do, and divvying up the stuff – in a way that's meaningful and satisfying to your parents – should be part of that process.

### Now's the time to divvy

Don't look on it as morbid. If anything, as a matter of practicality, it will be easier to make decisions before a triggering event like death occurs. There's time for your parents to choose how they want the process handled. There's time to let everyone in the family be as involved or uninvolved as they want to be. There's time to make decisions, and then make changes to those decisions.

Trust me: You don't want to put this off until your parents are gone and you're selling the house and disposing of the stuff that's still in it in a mad rush to settle the estate. Emotions are going to be too raw at that point. This really should be a joyous exercise.

After all, possessions are just things. In the larger scheme of life, things are not as important as the love and time we share with each other in our families. Yet decisions about personal belongings – sometimes referred to legally as “non-titled property” – often turn out to be more challenging and emotion-laden than decisions about titled property (like houses and cars) or the financial wealth accumulated over a lifetime.

### Dealing with “stuff”

Yes, families fight over money. But sometimes the fights over “stuff” are the really nasty ones. Those are the ones where the battle lines are drawn over intangible forms of value – sentimental rather than strictly financial, and sometimes spanning several generations – that the years have infused into the otherwise innocent and ordinary possessions that help define a lifetime.

What to do? *Who Gets Grandma's Yellow Pie Plate?* is a wonderful resource for adult children and parents to use in discussing the passing on of personal possessions. It's a large-print, 95-page workbook put out by the University of Minnesota Extension Service ([www.extension.umn.edu/info-u/finances/BF840.html](http://www.extension.umn.edu/info-u/finances/BF840.html)). It includes nine different worksheets designed to identify and decide what to do with things that don't have a legal title that clarifies ownership, but may have real value in the context of a family.

We put too much emphasis on stuff. Now, in your parents' later years, that can come back to create new heartaches – and headaches – for the family. Don't let the things in your parents' lives become a source of anguish and argument in yours. Help them decide quickly and simply, and then move on to more important concerns.

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*Kari Berit (www.KariBerit.com) is the author of The Unexpected Caregiver: How Boomers Can Keep Mom & Dad Active, Safe and Independent (2007: Attainment Company). Beginning in August, her new column, The Unexpected Caregiver, will appear every other month.*