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WORK & FAMILY

When 20-Somethings Move Back Home, It Isn't All Bad

By SUE SHELLNBARGER



Updated May 21, 2008 11:59 p.m. ET

In a new twist in U.S. family life, the open nest is replacing the empty nest.

More young adults are returning home to live with their parents in their 20s, and a surprising number of parents are content about it. Based on a new collection of studies, the deepest look so far at the failure-to-launch trend, the pattern is likely to persist. And as it becomes more widespread, researchers say, the stigma traditionally linked to young adults' living at home will fade.

More upper- and middle-income parents, including many who felt pressed for time when their children were growing up, aren't ready to be "finished with them" by their 20s, says Katherine Newman, a Princeton University sociology professor and one of the project's 20 researchers. Also, as more students attend college at older ages, parents are coming to regard the 20s as a time of self-discovery.

Alan Robbins, St. Louis, says he hasn't minded having his daughters home for a while post-college. Alison, 25, a fitness specialist, just moved out after two years at home spent working and saving money for a car and furniture. Diana, 22, moved home after graduating last weekend, enabling her to participate in a master's degree program while teaching third grade. Both pay most of their expenses.

The proportion of 18- to 34-year-olds living with their parents has risen by an estimated five percentage points since 1980, to roughly 34%, says Aaron Yelowitz, an associate professor of economics at the University of Kentucky and a contributor to the collection of studies "The Price of Independence," published by the Russell Sage Foundation.

To be sure, living together still causes tension for parents and kids alike. Living with parents reduces young adults' life satisfaction, Dr. Newman found. But the more widespread the practice, the less psychological toll it takes, she says. In southern Europe, where as many as 60% of young adults live at home, the stigma has eased; she cites research showing more than half of European adults think living longer with one's parents is a good thing.

Discuss

Can the blame for late-launching millennials be laid at the feet of time-starved working parents? Or are we swept up instead in a broader cultural shift, toward a more child-centric culture and more prolonged bonds with our children? Join a discussion on [The Juggle](#).

Similar attitudes are taking root in the U.S. While many young adults still get "cabin fever" living with parents, "there's no shame" in it any more, says Mr. Robbins's daughter, Alison. For her, living at home has been "a stepping-stone to help me get on my feet."

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Mary Ann Vlahac, who introduced me to the term "open nest," welcomed her 23-year-old college-graduate son back to her Stratford, Conn., home while he applies for jobs in law enforcement, she says. He does chores, cooks and pays room-and-board while working part-time as a truck driver.

Mother and son agree in separate interviews that they get on each other's nerves sometimes. But Ms. Vlahac, a single mother, says she enjoys seeing how well he's doing. Besides, she adds, their roles may reverse later.

Researchers on the project set out to document economic factors driving the trend, but found it's bigger than the financial causes usually blamed for it. To be sure, rising housing and commuting costs play a role, Dr. Yelowitz found. But neither those factors nor job-market changes fully explain the 25-year trend. The biggest increase in young adults living with parents came in the 1980s, when the labor market generally improved, he found. And rising real housing costs explain only about 15% of the drop in independent living among young adults, which started years before the sharpest run-up in housing.

More enduring cultural and social changes are at work, including a growing "child-centeredness" among families, Dr. Newman says. Many parents enjoy having adult kids around as long as they're pursuing "a future they can endorse."

Robert Thompson, San Francisco, wants his three children to find work they love. Thus when his 26-year-old son came home from college without a career plan, Mr. Thompson nudged him toward pursuing his passion, photography, then supported his plan to get a master's degree; he charges his son rent and will treat tuition as a loan. While he wishes his son were more focused, Mr. Thompson says, "Am I pleased with him as a human being? Absolutely. He's a good friend. We enjoy having him" home.

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