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By housing their twenty-something children and financing their lives, today's parents may be compromising their own.

By Pamela Paul, published on September 1, 2003 - last reviewed on June 9, 2016

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There's always an explanation: A 22-year-old college grad wants to hold out for the right job rather than jump into an underpaid makeshift position. Rents are so inflated, a 25-year-old moving out of her boyfriend's apartment couldn't possibly afford a place of her own. With two bedrooms to spare, parents can rehouse the kids and everyone will benefit.

Whatever the reason, young adults are returning home in increasing numbers—following graduation, the dissolution of a relationship or the loss of a job. They often live rent-free and subsidized, with no scheduled date for departure. But while much attention has been paid to live-at-home "adultescents," little has been said about their parents, many of whom are Baby Boomers who greet their boomerang kids with open arms. For a variety of emotional and demographic reasons—their desire to be close with their kids, a yearning for youth—many of today's parents (the original Peter Pan generation) just don't want their adult children to grow up.

"Parents used to let go when their children reached age 18," says David Anderegg, professor of psychology at Bennington College in Vermont and author of *Worried All the Time: Overparenting in the Age of Anxiety*. "The idea was, if you can go to jail, I'm no longer responsible for you." But that changed during the 1990s, when Baby Boomers' children turned 18 and devoted parents realized that they had poured their emotional and financial resources into their children from the get-go. "Hyper-investment," says Anderegg, "is hard to turn off."

Some argue that permaparenting stems from the indulgence of an immature and spoiled generation. Others blame the phenomenon on the heavy hand of social and economic forces. And our very definition of adulthood is in flux—with a homestead no longer a key component of adult identity (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/identity>).

ing their children's adult independence but also hampering their own post-parenting lives. In the wake of an acute crisis or devastating financial setback, the consensus is that parents should look twice at the reasons they continue to shelter their grown offspring. "If parents can get over the idea that they're not being 'parent enough' or that their kids still 'need' them, then they can get on with their new lives," says Roberta Maisel, author of *All Grown Up: Living Happily Ever After with Your Adult Children*.

The combination of high rents and an unstable job market, increased college attendance and delayed [marriage](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/marriage) and parenting conspire to inch the age of perceived adulthood upward. Bianca Mlotok, an unemployed college graduate who lives with her parents in New Jersey, admits that even years after graduating, she doesn't feel like a grown-up. "I'm a mature person, but I think I'm probably not capable of being on my own," she says. "I feel like an adult sometimes, but in other ways I still feel like a child. I guess I see being an adult as more about a certain level of maturity than about some kind of outward sign. Though probably when I start my own family, I'll finally have my own adult identity."

Bianca isn't the only twentysomething grappling with delayed adulthood. According to a study by the National Opinion Research Center, most Americans don't consider a person an adult until age 26, or until she or he has finished school, landed a full-time job, and begun to raise a family. Living independently from one's parents is expected by an average age of 21, yet living on one's own is considered less of a determining factor in reaching adulthood (only 29 percent say it's an "extremely important" step) than completing an [education](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/education) (73 percent) and supporting a family (60 percent).

Shifting parental attitudes toward boomerang kids have much to do with generational differences, the result of each generation correcting and overcorrecting the excesses of the previous one. The wave that preceded the Boomers, the Swing, or Silent, generation (born during the [Depression](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/depression) and World War II, 1930-1945) and their children, Generation X (born 1965-1978), were brought up during eras of economic recession, reduced birthrates and familial instability, when raising kids was not a societal focal point. Parents of Boomers "were eager for their kids to grow up and leave the household so that they could be free to pursue their own lives," says generational historian William Strauss. "Boomeranging home was a mark of failure for both children and parents."

In contrast, the Baby Boomers themselves (born between 1946 and 1964) and their Echo Boomer offspring (1979 and 1994) have had the happy fortune to be born during periods of prosperity and family growth that place an emphasis on [parenthood](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/parenting). From the 1980s hit *The Cosby Show* to kidcentric TV like Nickelodeon, Boomers were awash in media celebrating the rewards of child-rearing and the joys of [childhood](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/child-development). Five times more parenting books are published today than in 1970. Ann Hulbert, author of *Raising America: Experts, Parents and a Century of Advice About Children*, says the resultant professionalization of

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Keeping the Lines of Communication Open

All this attention, it turns out, has been directed toward raising well-adjusted and well-rounded kids, and guiding those self-same kids into fulfilled adulthood, creating patterns along the way. According to Jane Adams, a social psychologist and author of *When Our Grown Kids Disappoint Us*, previous generations emphasized education and financial independence over all else for their children. In contrast, "Boomers are the first generation for whom their children's emotional fulfillment is a primary goal. Their parental mantra has been, 'Be happy or I'll kill you.'" In an effort to gratify their kids, Boomers have become unusually invested in their lives—determined to have an authentic, intimate relationship with their children.

To achieve this level of chumminess, parents have often acted less like stern grownups and more like their kids' peers, joining the youth culture wholeheartedly at the mall, even purchasing the same teen-oriented clothes for themselves. This closeness continues and strengthens as Echo Boomers reach early adulthood. "The generation gap used to be a significant barrier between parents and adult kids," says Roberta Maisel. "But today's fiftysomething parent and twenty-something child have a lot of the same values and desires."

Therese Christophe, a long-separated woman who lives with her grown son, Alexandre, says the arrangement works well precisely because her son and his friends don't view her as very different from themselves. "They see me as an adult, but they know I'm cool enough to be their friend," she explains. "I don't try to play this mother role. There's always been an equal relationship, and we're very tight. I'm not judgmental of him and he isn't judgmental of me." The result: "Living with my kid is like having a roommate, only a lot better."

Today's twentysomethings and their parents communicate better and are closer, finds family therapist Betty Frain. Indeed, in a survey of 1,003 high school students, a whopping 78 percent said that "having close family relationships" ranked highest (above money and fame, among other things) in defining success. But

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 "V <https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/mid-life-crisis> and it's time for you to go," says Frank Furedi. "Vendly with our kids."

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Studies suggest that grown kids' well-being is a major determinant of well-being for midlife (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/mid-life-crisis>) parents. But over-identification with adult children means parents can lose perspective on what's best for one or both parties. "You see your kids' successes and failures as your own and thus try to immunize your child against failure," says Frank Furedi, professor of sociology at the University of Kent in the United Kingdom. With such a high level of emotional and financial investment, many parents see the status of their adult children as a final parental exam. And parents don't want a bad grade—either for themselves or for their kids.

Not surprisingly, parental involvement in kids' lives has pushed its way onto campuses, where "helicopter parents" hover, trying to help their kids through college financially, emotionally and even academically. Parents have been known to intervene in roommate disputes following an emotional e-mail plea from a child, or call a professor to question a grade. In response, universities are scheduling special parent orientation events, hiring parental "liaisons" to handle questions and demands, and firing off terse-but-diplomatic guidelines.

The days when parents simply dropped their kids off and waved goodbye are as antiquated as the college mixer. Today, *The Harvard College Handbook for Parents* is rife with messages to back off: "Parents are often tempted to call advisers or administrators or even rush back to Cambridge to 'make sure' that problems are quickly resolved," one booklet warns. "In fact, these well-intentioned efforts invariably slow the process by which freshmen learn to take responsibility for their dealings with individuals and institutions."

No Help Like Home

The most blatant manifestation of permaparenting is the phenomenon of boomerang kids. According to the census, in 2000, 4 million people between the ages of 25 and 34 lived with their folks. In a

g... <https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/entitlement>. She also coined a term for Back-to-Bedroom, which she describes as "the phenomenon of jobless Gen Xers and Gen Ys returning to their parents' homes." NBC aired a show called *Happy Family*, a sitcom about a middle-aged couple who can't get rid of their adult children.

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Yet many Boomers don't seem to be trying all that hard to empty the nest. "Boomerang kids are staying at home so they can save money to rent or buy a place of their own instead of living with roommates," says Jane Adams. "Often, they're spending lots of money on clothes and cars and vacations in the process. Unless we put our foot down, why should they move out?"

Whereas pre-Boomer parents—the GI and Depression/ War generations—reminded their children constantly of their sacrifices and taught them to be grateful (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/gratitude>) for opportunities (what some might call "guilt-tripping"), Baby Boomers didn't want to do that to their kids. According to Adams, having grown up in an era of relative stability, Boomers inadvertently raised the next generation to feel entitled.

But it's not just privileged white kids hanging out at home. Working-class twentysomethings have long boomeranged following high school or vocational training because entry-level wages make independent living a financial challenge. Still, lower income Americans today are even less able to be independent than just a decade ago, according to Frank Furstenberg Jr., professor of sociology at the University of Pennsylvania and head of the Network on the Transition to Adulthood study. Furthermore, America's growing diversity means more adult children at home come from immigrant and ethnic communities in which living at home during one's twenties is normative and even favorable. A national survey of Latinos found that 78 percent agreed "it is better for children to live in their parents' home until they get married."

Leaving home is getting tougher across social classes and ethnic backgrounds. In the absence of a stable labor market, and with a lack of federal support (such as the GI Bill for education), "we're throwing a lot of things back on the family that the government (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/politics>) was doing

... at Oregon State College in Washington state. This today aren't necessarily bad, but the coming of age when economic and federal forces thwart independence. Parents are stepping in, Coontz says, because they don't really have a choice.

Perhaps expectations are higher as well. Many experts say today's twentysomethings don't want to downscale by sharing a walk-up with three roommates when their middle class parents have a house where they can crash. Boomers don't want their kids to rough it either. "Emotional and financial dependence is a two-way street," says Adams, a Baby Boomer herself. "Our generation has taken it upon ourselves to make our grown kids happy. We've abrogated our responsibility to insist they make a life for themselves. Instead we're providing it for them." Often, if parents don't house their grown kids, those with extra cash will help an adult child purchase a home.

Keith and Virginia Edwards have allowed all three of their twenty- and thirtysomething kids to live at home, with spouses and grandchildren in tow, for periods of up to three years. The Edwards's latest boomeranger, Jon, who is in his 30's, moved back—along with his wife and daughter—two years ago. That way, he could train for a job change and his wife could be a full-time mother while they saved up to buy a home.

Keith says he doesn't mind that his adult kids have returned home, and has even encouraged it. "In each case, they wouldn't have been able to save for a down payment if they'd had to rent an overpriced apartment," he explains. "We wanted them to buy a home rather than rent, so the best solution all around was for them to come back and live with us."

The Parental Toll

Permaparents suffer potential financial and emotional repercussions. The empty-nest years are a crucial time for adults to bone up for [retirement \(https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/aging\)](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/aging), rather than pay off their child's credit cards or feed another mouth. Keeping the kids also prevents couples from reconfiguring their lives in a post-parenting marriage, when, historically, many marriages break up. When marriages do end in [divorce \(https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/divorce\)](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/divorce), or when one spouse dies, parents may be especially inclined to reconnect with their adult kids.

"The [empty nest \(https://www.psychologytoday.com/conditions/empty-nest-syndrome\)](https://www.psychologytoday.com/conditions/empty-nest-syndrome) is doubly empty when you don't share it with a partner," says Betty Frain, who sees close relationships between single mothers and their adult children so often that she labels it a phenomenon. Nevertheless, as Roberta Maisel explains, "For women who find themselves widowed or divorced in their 50s or 60s, being too involved in adult children's lives can be a big mistake. They have decades ahead and need to find a way to approach their lives as individuals."

Married or not, adults who re-feather the nest past its prime postpone their own personal development. During the late 1990s, a spate of books with titles like *Give Them Wings* or *As You Leave Home: Parting*

as one who needs help from adult children, and seems to prefer it financially, and urge not to let the child know that having kids at home is generally a bad idea. Unless the child is suffering from a crisis, adult children belong on their own; empty nest parents have their own lives to attend to. Jeffrey Arnett, author of the book *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties*, believes boomeranging home may not be such a bad idea for twentysomethings but concedes it may not be best for parents. "Parents like being in a position to help their kids, and they like the fact that they get along well enough to live together," he says. "But parents are usually ready by then to move on with their own lives."

Indeed, many psychologists believe the post-parenting period is one in which people have the opportunity to reconfigure their identities—to relocate, downshift or change a career (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/career>), become more involved in the community, take continuing education courses or learn new creative skills. Carl Jung in particular emphasized the importance of this last stage of development. Having an adult child lurking around the house and feeding off the parental nest egg robs parents of some of this latitude. "These parents end up impeding their own transition into a new period of adulthood," say Furedi. "It's a flight from life." Permaparents, perhaps it's time to grow up.

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