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November 2011

## To Linger or Launch

A growing number of mid-20s adults are still residing with their parents. Known by generational monikers (Nexters, Generation Y, Echo-Boomers, and the Digital Generation etc.), these young adults are either remaining at home with their parents well into their 20s or returning home after having left home to go to college or to start a new job. These adults are not specific to any given demographic; you will see these young adults in all kinds of neighborhoods and family structures. These are young adults who have chosen to not emancipate themselves and who are perfectly content to linger at home a bit beyond the time their parents did when they were young. Are their parents mad and frustrated about this living situation? For the most part they are not. While their Baby Boomer parents often were anxious to leave home and start their own independent lives, these young adults actually like their parents, agree with them on most political issues, have good communication and enjoy their family's company.

In addition to this, Generation Ys were the most coached and affirmed generation. They looked to adults for guidance and help and are planning their lives along different timeframes than their parents. This generation will live into their 80s and 90s so they are in no rush to accomplish all of the rites of passage into adulthood in their 20s. They have good friends and social connections and little anxiety about where their next meal is coming from. Few of their parents are charging them for room and board so they have an opportunity to start their adult lives with less sacrifice and hardship than their parents did.

Adding to this, a growing number of young adults are delaying marriage, children and debt accumulation. A number of them do have significant debt associated with mounting college loans that have to be repaid and in this time of economic uncertainty and downturn, it takes a significant income to get established in an independent living situation. Many who have completed advanced educational degrees are in a particularly challenging job market, finding they must compete with candidates who have considerably more experience. They are unable to afford to live independently while waiting for job offers in careers for which they have prepared. Their parents want them to succeed and are willing to expend some of their own resources to ensure this will happen.

Take Sandy for example. She graduated from high school with honors, is attending Wichita State University and has her sights set on becoming a registered nurse when she graduates. Sandy is well connected to her family, enjoys family activities and is given a lot of autonomy while living with her parents. Sandy says the arrangement works for her because she has no bills or rent payments and this enables her to focus on attending school. Sandy says she really enjoys the relationship with her family and likes to keep them up to date on her life. She does have friends who are struggling on their own and some she describes as "moochers" - living at home, unemployed and with no aspirations to attend advanced schooling who spend a lot of time on their X-boxes. Sandy does admit that if she had a lot of money she would move out but would continue to have frequent contact with her family and would show up for dinner any night of the week when her mother prepared her favorite dishes. Sandy reports that the living arrangement was well discussed in advance with clear expectations. She and her parents have an understanding that she is expected to move out when she obtains her degree. They all agree when this is anticipated to occur.

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However, not all young adults living with their parents are welcome there. There are also a growing number of adult children dubbed “Boomerangers.” These are individuals who return home to care for aging parents or whose marriages, school ventures or initial careers did not turn out as planned. Whether or not these adults are welcome in their parents’ home depends on whether there are clear goals and time frames for staying there. According to a study conducted by two Michigan State researchers in 2007, many of today’s young adults claim to want challenging and rewarding careers, yet they do not take the necessary actions to plan and prepare for these careers.

There are far more problems with these “children” who seem adrift and in many cases not certain of where they want to head next. These situations are more long term and much harder for Boomer parents to contend with. Some of the Boomerangers have young children of their own, adding strain on the space and finances of their parents. About half of the young people between 18 and 28 recently surveyed reported they didn’t have concrete career goals or plans. This lack of vision and goals makes it almost impossible for them to move forward.

Boomer parents need to consider which of these categories best describes the situation with their lingering children. If goal setting and planning are the issue, parents can best help their children by discussing viable options and helping them commit to plans for the immediate future. There are many developmental tasks associated with the transition to adulthood. Parents who have meaningful discussions with their children can better help them navigate this transition. Parents and their maturing adult children can look at other transitions in their children’s lives to see what worked and didn’t in making transitions. Parents can help their young adult children identify and reinforce the strengths they possess and identify barriers to forward movement. They can best assist these emerging adults by helping them plan for the transition, talk about the fears and uncertainties, help them make and adhere to a budget and gradually shed the reliance on their parents.

Parents in these situations are challenged with the concurrent tasks of maintaining the bonds, while changing the relationship with their children to one of more mutual give and take. But in the meantime, parents need to understand that it has become common for young adults to have delayed “launches” into independent living, which may be a reflection of the times rather than something that was seen as dysfunction in the past.