PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS IN EARLY ADULTHOOD: COLLEGE STUDENTS LIVING AT HOME

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Tuition rates for higher education continue to rise at the same time a growing number of young adults are deciding that they need college training to attain their career goals. One common method to cope with the financial strain is for students to remain in the home of their parents while they complete college. Freshmen attending community colleges and their parents were interviewed to identify what they perceived to be the challenges and benefits of living together for a longer time than was the custom in the past. Recommendations for reciprocal learning and revising generational expectations are explored.

There is a cultural phenomenon in Italy known as “mammoni” which means mama’s boy (de Blasi, 2003). These include men who live at home with their parents well into middle age. They count on mother to make their beds, clean their room, do their laundry, fix their clothing, buy their groceries, and prepare their meals. Most of them acknowledge that only a loving mother would provide the special treatment they are accustomed to because wives would generally refuse such a role. Giorgio Boemo provides an example of the mammoni lifestyle. His 77-year-old mother gets up at five in the morning to squeeze fresh orange juice for Giorgio. By seven she is on her way to the nearby 15th century church where candles are lit and prayers

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are offered for Giorgio, other family members, and for those suffering throughout the world. By the time Giorgio returns home for lunch, his clothes have been washed and ironed, his bed has been made, and a delicious meal is waiting. Giorgio, age 39, describes his situation as “paradisio.”

To most Americans Giorgio is an anachronism. He is someone who is seriously out of touch with the changing times and unwilling to adjust to modern expectations of mutual respect and equality of obligation that should characterize parent-child relationships in adulthood. On the other hand, it seems appropriate to recognize the implications of a related phenomenon that has been emerging in the United States. Men and women between 18 and 40 years of age living at home with parents represent a new lifestyle. This group, estimated at 25 million, has increased by 50% over the past generation (Adams, 2003).

InsightExpress (2003), an on-line marketing firm, surveyed 500 persons in the 20 to 29 year age range to find out how they view the real world. More than 25% reported they live with parents. Most indicated they seldom experience the social stigma that was once associated with this kind of living arrangement. Only 1/3 of those with full-time employment were satisfied with the status of their career, and about 45% of them accept financial help from relatives. In retrospect, 40% of the college-educated felt that, had they known earlier what they know now, they would have changed their major field of study.

RECOGNIZING CHANGES IN EARLY ADULTHOOD

Social observers are agreed that early adulthood has significantly changed (Cote, 2000; Grossman, 2005). But, the schools, families, workplace, and community institutions that society has relied on to support individuals as they transition from one stage of life to the next have been slow in reacting to new conditions. In response, the MacArthur Foundation established a Network on Transitions to Adulthood (2003). This cadre of selected scholars representing psychology, public health, economics, criminology, and sociology are collaborating to find ways of ensuring adequate support for young adults who are the most currently ignored segment of society. More specifically, the Network on Transitions to Adulthood researchers emphasize four concerns:

Education

Moving from the classroom to employment increasingly depends upon learning skills that match entry requirements for the shifting
marketplace. President George W. Bush (2004) has identified community colleges as an underutilized resource that can provide specialized courses in fast-changing areas of technology and business, thereby enabling more students to fulfill entry expectations of employers.

**Labor Economics**

Getting a job does not necessarily provide an acceptable standard of living. Therefore, development opportunities are being explored to figure out how continuous training could produce better-prepared workers who receive higher wages.

**Social History**

Many young adults are choosing to postpone consideration of marriage in favor of cohabitation. To support the well-being of marriages and young families, some traditional government policies and social programs may need to be replaced by a more innovative agenda.

**Ethnography**

Forecasts of a dramatic increase in population of minorities and immigrants over the next 20 years implies an urgent need to understand how adolescents from these groups can be given the support they need to successfully transition to young adulthood.

**MOTIVATIONS FOR LIVING WITH PARENTS**

College students typically try to build a resume that can secure a middle-income lifestyle. Many of them also seek the lowest tuition, a decision that usually means attending one of the nation’s 1,200 community colleges (Washburn, 2004). The federal government plans to provide community colleges $250 million to train workers for industries creating the most new jobs (Bush, 2004). This intention underscores the relevance of community colleges to meet employment needs in a rapidly changing global economy. Hispanic parents, more often than other families, prefer that their children, especially daughters, stay home while going to college. This arrangement makes good financial sense because it enables students to avoid loans that can produce considerable debt at the same time students are expected to contribute to their family earning pot (McGlynn, 2003). In addition, students’ decisions to remain with parents while in college
can be motivated by the allure of keeping their own bedroom, enjoying home cooking, having access to laundry, and more frequent opportunities for family interaction.

Parents of young adults in college express another set of motivations. In the past, the expectation was that children would leave home after they finished high school and found a job or went away to college. However, the cost of higher education has dramatically risen at the same time greater numbers of young adults have concluded they need to earn a college degree to attain their career goals (Washburn, 2004). Parents generally agree with their daughters and sons about the economic practicality of a community college curriculum. Permitting them to live at home is regarded as an important contribution to their success.

Some parents whose grown children are still at home admit that, in certain ways, their household may not be much different from that of Giorgio, the Italian mammoni. Consequently, these parents worry about the prospect that grown sons and daughters may choose to never move away and set up a place of their own (Pisani, 2001). An opposite reaction is expressed by other parents who realize that they have not developed a sense of identity apart from their parent role and fear the isolation of an “empty nest” (Weiner, 1997). Whatever the motivation to live together over a longer duration, parents and young-adult children often must renegotiate their expectations of one another. Both generations should consider and discuss ahead of time the potential difficulties and possible benefits associated with this arrangement.

**LIVING AWAY FROM HOME**

Studies have consistently shown that young adults who no longer live at home report a closer relationship with their parents and fewer negative feelings toward them than do peers still living with their parents (O’Conner, Allen, Bell, & Hauser, 1996). Some research has explored relationships based on distance. Those living at least 1 hour by car away from their parents report the highest level of closeness and place the highest value on opinions of mothers and fathers. Young men and women living less than 1 hour by car from their parents report less favorable relationships. Persons who still reside with their parents give them the poorest ratings (Adams, 2003; Dubas & Peterson, 1996).

Colleges provide information on their websites about improvements they are making in dormitory housing. Most entering students have always had their own bedroom and expect privacy in the new
Parental Relationships with Students Living at Home

environment. Many students also bring a vast amount of technology with them including personal computers, laptops, televisions, video recorders, cell phones, personal digital assistants, and peripherals. These require more energy and additional electrical outlets than dormitories provided in the past. The efforts of educational institutions to meet changing needs of students have been credited with facilitating adjustment and promoting learning. The downside is a continual rise in the cost of student housing (Trombley, 2003).

LIVING AT HOME

The literature is meager regarding what college students and parents with whom they live can do to attain greater mutual support, reciprocal learning, and harmony. To attain greater awareness of the possibilities, community college freshmen still living at home and one or both of their parents were interviewed. The sample of 166 students (87 men and 79 women) and 218 of their parents (127 mothers and 91 fathers) was from culturally diverse, low and middle-income backgrounds. The generations were interviewed separately so they were not present to hear or bias responses of one another. The interviews centered on (a) identification of difficulties in living with parents as reported by young-adult college students; (b) problems encountered by parents whose children live at home while they go to college; (c) possible benefits for college students who reside with their parents; and (d) possible benefits for parents whose college-age children remain at home. Generational findings are summarized with implications from related studies.

DIFFICULTIES YOUNG-ADULT COLLEGE STUDENTS EXPERIENCE WHEN LIVING WITH PARENTS

The most common complaint expressed by college students was lack of privacy, being denied the freedom of personal space enjoyed by peers living by themselves in an apartment or school dormitory. Financial dependence on the parents was often accompanied by frustration and ambivalence in making self-comparisons with fully employed friends whose job provided enough income so they could take care of themselves. One college freshman expressed his frustration in the following manner, “It’s bad enough my parents have to give me money but, to make matters worse, we have to live together.” The consistency of these types of observations urges the conclusion that, according to young adults, economic independence
should cease to be a condition for acceptance of daughters and sons as adults (Nichols & Good, 2004). Parents who recognize college-age children as grownups are more likely to stop treating them as though they were still children. The assumption that the cohort of students entering college immediately after high school graduation have yet to attain adulthood is reinforced in families where parents do all the chores instead of insisting that everyone in the household assume some of these responsibilities.

Living at home typically means more frequent participation in arguments over a longer period of time than was usual in the past. Disputes usually center on sharing the car, excessive phone expenses, use of the bathroom, contents of the refrigerator, and accommodating different schedules. Because parents are the homeowners, they may suppose it is acceptable for them to establish house rules without any discussion. In the extreme, this policy-making takes the form of arbitrary statements like “as long as you live in my house, you must follow my rules.” Listening to loud music or watching television programs which relatives dislike can be troublesome. Taking a girlfriend or boyfriend into the bedroom and closing the door or having friends over for a party necessitates some negotiation. Young men and women often feel that they are unable to actually test their own limits while they remain at home because there are so few opportunities for them to be responsible for self-care.

Differences in the biological clock of students and parents can result in conflicting schedules about the time to eat and time to go to bed. As part of a neuroscience study at Brown University, 3,000 adolescents were asked to keep a diary about their sleep patterns. A majority reported getting less than 7 hours of sleep a night. Two-thirds reported that bedtime was after eleven on school nights, even though they had to wake early for classes. Sleep deprivation is common among college students (Carskadon & Mancuso, 1998). Students who struggle and doze during the day become energetic and stimulated in the evening, often staying up past midnight. Many of them say they rely on heavily caffeinated beverages to compensate for lack of sleep and sustain their attention. Meanwhile, parents who wake up at night and hear the television complain, “It’s late. When are you going to bed?”

DIFFICULTIES PARENTS EXPERIENCE WHEN YOUNG-ADULT COLLEGE STUDENTS LIVE AT HOME

Parents of college students who are living with them identified additional concerns. The lengthy education necessary to join the
workforce means that the duration of parent responsibility to provide economic support must go beyond norms of the past. Otherwise, parents are bound to struggle with doubts about their own success. Some suppose that, if children are still living at home and do not have a full time job by age 25 or 30, the effort to raise an independent child has failed. There are also parents who appear inclined to make comparisons between what they were doing at the present age of young-adult children. According to one mother, “When I was your age, I was already married, had two children and was working fulltime.” A more appropriate response is to acknowledge the reality of a more-skilled labor market and consequent delay in the age at which people enter the workforce, get married, and have children compared to previous generations.

Past-oriented societies typically celebrate initiation rites that facilitate a rapid transition from being a child to recognition as an adult. These rituals are sometimes offensive to outsiders. Nevertheless, the result is a commonly agreed upon transformation in a person’s status and sense of identity, along with the assumption of adult rights and responsibilities. Certainly youth in technological societies get favorable feedback about their progression toward adulthood. When compulsory education is completed, they are allowed to drive, vote, and enter theaters when grownup-oriented films are shown. But, the experience of formal initiation into adulthood is missing in modern settings. Now, adolescents typically express uncertainty and anxiety about their status, and identity remains a major concern for a much longer time. Identity rites seem suitable in cultures where: (a) children can realistically expect to have an adult lifestyle which closely resembles that of their parents; (b) gender roles are clearly defined and applied to ensure the division of labor; (c) cultural homogeneity obtains; (d) there is a uniform family structure for socializing youth; and (e) life is relatively short with predictable roles. None of these conditions exist in modern America.

The expectation of having to continue a financially supportive role over a more lengthy period disappoints some parents. Such an obligation contradicts plans they had made earlier to be free of clutter, noise, and disruption when adolescents became old enough to move out. As one father reflected, “This was to be the time when my wife and I could rediscover each other, remodel our child’s bedroom into a comfortable study, have constant access to our car, telephone, and bathroom, take the basketball hoop down from the garage, plant a garden, walk around the house naked if we want to, and spend more money on ourselves instead of putting the children first.”

There is no maturity without obligation. Accordingly, parents should learn to relate to college-age children as adults and, if they
failed to do so earlier, train them to assume responsibilities that make life easier for others sharing the same residence. The importance of this training is difficult to overstate. Parents are generally agreed that teenagers should have chores and division of labor has improved in homes where sons carry out tasks once assigned to girls only. Paula, a middle-aged mother, applauds this shift, "When I was growing up, kids in my family all had chores. The boys took care of the lawn and other outside jobs. My mother tried to assign my brothers inside tasks like doing dishes, which they considered women’s work. The boys would bribe their sisters and said that they would give us part of their allowance if we just would do the dishes for them. At this time, my brothers still owe me $825,000. None of them paid their debt.” Allowing youth to ignore their obligations toward relatives means that they are being poorly prepared for the interdependent relationships that society will require of them as adults. Parents acknowledged this shortcoming much more often in relation to sons than daughters.

Parents of college students admitted uncertainty about whether their child has become a grownup. Some gave confusing excuses for why the younger relative could not yet be expected to do laundry, help shop for groceries, mow the lawn, clean the toilet, or perform other chores. There were also parents who felt insulted by being told they have old fashioned ideas while their college-student children who advocate equality throughout the world cannot recognize what that means in terms of sharing chores and taking into account the needs of loved ones with whom they live. In effect, they should practice what is preached and “think globally, act locally.” In a similar manner, a minority of parents regretted their loss of authority and interpreted conflicting ideas from children as evidence of disrespect. When parents find themselves opposing one another over what to expect of their adult child, or how to present a united front, the marriage can sometimes suffer as both partners endure emotional strain.

POSSIBLE BENEFITS FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS LIVING AT HOME WITH PARENTS

Students uniformly identified the economic advantages they enjoy. Staying at home usually means avoiding rent and not having to purchase groceries. These benefits make a great difference in being able to go to college and graduate within a reasonable time. For some students, particularly young men, this can also be a final opportunity to acquire healthy attitudes and habits that reflect empathy and sharing rather than unfair expectations that a girlfriend
or spouse will take their mother’s place in doing everything for them. More parents must do a better job in preparing sons to fulfill reasonable expectations held by young women for domestic equity. In the process, young-adult men will improve their chances for a successful marriage.

Adult children report that they receive valuable feedback about their ideas and behavior when the parents are seen as mature, creative, and nonjudgmental. Then too, the examples that parents provide in how to handle everyday frustrations, setbacks, and failures of adulthood are often more carefully observed by college students than when they were in high school. In previous studies, we have found that Caucasian adolescents \(N = 537\) and African American adolescents \(N = 396\) perceived their parents to be ineffective in teaching them to cope with daily stress. Parents generally overestimate their influence in this context. To offer credible advice on stress, a person must be able to demonstrate this capacity in their life. One method is to occasionally withdraw from daily tasks to recover a sense of perspective. It is troubling that one of the lowest self-ratings reported by Caucasian \(N = 391\) and African American \(N = 271\) mothers is their difficulty in arranging leisure time for themselves. Mothers suffer from the stress of multiple responsibilities that include taking care of their husband, satisfying an employer, managing the household, and perhaps caring for aging parents (Strom, P. et al., 2003; Strom, R. et al., 2002b).

African-American \(N = 102\) and Caucasian \(N = 126\) fathers of adolescents resemble mothers in reporting that their greatest difficulty is arranging leisure time for themselves. This lack of ability to schedule free time is bound to impact parenting. Fathers do not accept as much obligation as mothers do for childcare and guidance. It is improbable that a father could teach children to deal with multiple demands on their time when he is unable to set aside time for his own personal renewal. Living with over-choice, feeling hurried, and sensing a lack of control over events is an increasingly common complaint in society. Fathers and mothers must deal with this problem or they cannot effectively teach children how to manage time. When students conclude that parents cannot teach lessons that they have yet to learn themselves, sources outside the family become the healthy or unhealthy models young adults may choose to emulate (Strom, R. et al., 2000; Strom, R., Beckert, Strom, Strom, & Griswold, 2002a).

Successful families exhibit common strengths regardless of whether they are first-marriage couples, stepparents, or single parents from any racial group. One of these strengths is spending sufficient amounts of time together. Time seems crucial because it impacts
upon all the other traits of a healthy family. Communication, learning, and emotional support are bound to decline when a family loses control of how it spends time. When parents describe their greatest difficulties in raising teenagers, the dominant response is “being too busy and not spending enough time together” (Strom, Strom, Shen & Beckert, 2004). Mothers and fathers of elementary and high school students sometimes rationalize that the occasions they are with their children is “quality time.” In contrast, “quality time” as defined by children is any time they need parents, rather than when parents fit them into their schedule.

Ellen Galinsky (1999) at the Work and Family Institute in New York City interviewed 1,000 students from grades 3–12. She found that nearly half of them felt that the time they were with their parents was hurried. This means there are too few sustained and serious conversations that allow parents an opportunity to model patience, empathy, reflection, critical thinking, and other positive qualities considered essential for lifetime success. More parents may need to attain a better sense of balance so their stated priorities are accurately reflected by the ways in which they invest their time.

Students in college usually have a more demanding schedule than younger children. Their obligations typically include attending classes, doing assignments, fulfilling tasks for their employer, and hanging out with friends. The majority of community college students work 20 or more hours a week (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2003). In combination, their obligations may leave less time for family interaction than at an earlier age. This opportunity may not seem as important to them because they no longer require supervision from their parents. On the other hand, current knowledge regarding the evolution of relationships with parents as children come to acquire greater autonomy merits consideration. Scholars who study parental competence have mostly focused on differences in socioeconomic status and formal education. It has been assumed that advantages in bringing up children closely relate to these characteristics. This approach is narrow and should be revised to include variables that can be controlled.

In studies of culturally-diverse parents of adolescents, the influence of a nontraditional variable was included that can be directly manipulated in ways that more fixed socioeconomic traits cannot. For these diverse populations, differences in adolescent access to parents’ time had significantly more influence than family income or educational level of parents in how parent success was perceived by their teenagers and themselves. Mothers and fathers who invest greater time interacting with adolescents know them better—so they
are able to provide more relevant advice than parents who devote less
time (Strom, P. et al., 2003; Strom, R. et al., 2000; Strom, R. et al.
2002a; Strom, R. et al., 2002b).

The “adolescent access to parent time” variable implicates decision
making in all families. Parents cannot easily change their income or
level of education. But they can resolve to spend more time with chil-
dren. Conversely, young adults should consider the same circum-
stance. They should recognize that the time they and their parents
still have left together during the college years could offer additional
opportunities for reciprocal learning, mutual adjustment, and closer
relationships. Hopefully, more students will recognize the benefits
of establishing sufficient interaction with parents as a priority. In
the final analysis, the way each person spends time affects their influ-
ence and makes known how they define themselves.

**BENEFITS FOR PARENTS WHEN ADULT CHILDREN IN
COLLEGE CONTINUE LIVING AT HOME**

Getting to know children as grownups means exploring their goals,
values, and concerns as individuals. It also means becoming better
informed about the prevailing concepts and views that reflect the
norms of their generation. Knowing the fears, worries, priorities,
and disappointments of young adults can motivate parents to start
treating them as grownups. Parents who make it known that they
prize the chance to learn from their children have much to gain.
When both parties are growth-oriented and willing to learn from each
other, they can solicit feedback about their progress in reaching the
goals chosen for personal success. When the parent-child relationship
based upon hierarchical authority is augmented with greater friend-
ship, both parties are more inclined to look to one another for advice.

Some mothers and fathers do not want to listen to the complaints
of young adult children regarding the demands of school, teachers, or
the rigors of being a student. These parents often forfeit the role of
confidante by reacting with comments that shut down conversation,
such as, “You are really lucky to be able to go to school. I never had
that opportunity.” A more reasonable response is stimulated by a
recognition that the stresses experienced at school, with peers, and
in the workplace today need to be shared with someone. As a rule,
people choose to rely on a trusted relative or friend who listens to
them without being judgmental. This circumstance presents parents
with possibilities to offer feedback on behavior of the younger rela-
tive and suggest alternative ways to consider in dealing with daily
dilemmas. Such conversations are motivating, and can occur far more
often with young adults than with adolescents. In effect, parents whose children remain at home while attending college have a greater amount of time to affect life skill considerations; and young adults are, in many cases, more ready at their age to learn these things.

**CONCLUSION**

At every stage of life we are either too old or too young to have first-hand knowledge about certain things through direct experience. Parents of college-age students must find out what young adulthood is like in the current environment or they cannot give relevant advice to match the situations their younger relatives face. Mothers and fathers only know what early adulthood was like a generation ago. Similarly, college students may be unaware of how events are perceived by the parents. Fortunately, both parties can improve their influence and enrich the relationship by their mutual effort to engage in reciprocal learning. Learning how to participate in this unprecedented opportunity for interaction may be the most challenging aspect of maturity for the parents—and the greatest test of growing up for the young adults.

**REFERENCES**


