



THE MIDDLE YEARS of LIFE

3.

WHEN ADULT CHILDREN RETURN HOME

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By Jeanne E. Brown

Extension Human

Development Specialist

Julia F. Micheal

Extension Home Economist

As adults near the middle years of life (age 40-65) they develop expectations of what this period of life will be like. Many people expect midlife to be a time of fulfillment. For these people, marriages have been made, if marriage is to be a part of a person's life; children have been born and are now being reared or on their own; they have been established in the working world for some time; and they have the good health to enjoy their lives. Midlife promises to be a period of greater leisure, financial resources, freedom from major child-rearing responsibilities and the time to grow as a person. But for many parents, the return of adult children to the family home, and/or their need for financial support, interrupts the continuity of midlife. This comes as a shock to many parents, for this did not happen very often when the parents were young adults.

The Changes

In recent years, the combination of inflation and recession has kept many young adults from firmly establishing themselves in the work place. This may force them to turn to their parents for financial support to supplement meager wages, help when jobs are lost or help with needed educational retraining. Divorce is another reason why some must seek help from their parents. Many grown children just can't afford to live away from home. This phenomenon is so new that very little has been written to help parents live together comfortably with grown children who return home.

When adult children return to the family home, the parents' expectations of midlife may be abruptly suspended. Privacy, the long-awaited peace and quiet, and freedom may be lost. Space may become tight. Suddenly, parents have to deal with more laundry, higher grocery, utility and phone bills, and competition for the bathroom, telephone and television. Conflicts may also occur over moral values and lifestyles.

The young adults, on their part, can be as frustrated as their parents. They appreciate being able to live at home and want to get along, but fitting back into the daily family life after having experienced independent living is difficult. No one knows quite what to expect or how to behave.

Difficulties and Solutions

Monica Lauen O'Kane, in her book, **Living With Adult Children**, points out that finances can be a big problem when grown children return home. The most vexing issues are room and board, budgets, loans, insurance and taxes. O'Kane found the No. 1 issue between parents and children is room and board. Since most adult children return because of financial problems, it may be difficult for them to contribute room and board money. Or, parents may feel uncomfortable

asking them for money. How parents and children handle this issue depends upon the parents' and children's financial resources and responsibilities. For example, if the adult child is working part-time and going to school, he or she may not have money to pay room and board. In this case, he or she can do work around the house in exchange for room and board.

**The secret
of living together...
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Another potential problem area for parents and adult children involves consideration for others, cooperation, and respect for each others' space and territory, time and possessions. Small irritations can grow into big conflicts, so it is better to discuss them when they are small.

If there are conflicts, keeping quiet about them is not the answer. In families where there has been a complete break between the parents and a grown child, it is usually because problems have never been addressed. It's a good idea for parents to take the lead and say whatever it is they are "itching to say," but to say it as fairly and mildly as possible. Fighting is not bad, but letting the fight turn into continual family bickering can make everyone miserable.

Professional advisors generally agree that if it is necessary for grown children to return to the family home, the family group should work out every detail in advance—chores, finances and even when and how the arrangement can be ended. These guidelines should be fair and open to review and change as needs change. Some families write down these guidelines and post them in a conspicuous place so everyone knows exactly what to expect of one another.

The secret of living together, according to O'Kane, is the ability to communicate with one another—to talk with, and listen to, each other. If family members cannot communicate, hidden resentments can be a real problem.

Helping Each Other

Virginia Satir, a family counselor, teacher and parent of grown children, sees nothing wrong in extending help to family members if people come together to decide about helping freely, taking into consideration the needs of each other. Parents and adult children, according to Satir, need to take the people point of view instead of the role point of view. "Parent" and "child" are names of roles that people assume at different points as they go through life. The parent role is largely concerned with teaching, guiding and being responsible for the dependent child. The child's role is learning and being dependent. Parents and adult children must adjust these roles so they can know each other as independent and worthwhile adult people living together.

It is necessary to keep the perspective that love and respect for each other are fundamental for adult-to-adult relations. A child should respect the parents' feelings and customs, but he or she must also feel free to make legitimate choices that may be contrary to his parents' desires. Parents should respect their adult children's feelings and values and feel free to make the choices that are necessary for them.

Many benefits can be realized when grown children return to the family home, according to O'Kane. It's a way for family members to get to know each other as adults, it offers companionship, it broadens family interests, it's an opportunity to mend damaged relationships and it's enjoyable to share family fun together. It's also an excellent way for parents to demonstrate to young adults that it is important for family members to care for one another.

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Issued in furtherance of cooperative extension work in agriculture and home economics, acts of May 8, and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Gordon E. Guyer, Director, Cooperative Extension Service, Michigan State University, E. Lansing, MI 48824.

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