

contents

Introduction: Great Joy . . . or Great Pain	9
1. Getting to Know Today's Adult Child	15
2. When Your Adult Child Is Not Succeeding	25
3. When the Nest Isn't Emptying	39
4. When Your Child Moves Home	57
5. Major Hurdles to Independence	73
6. Conflicts over Lifestyle Issues	95
7. Becoming an In-law and a Grandparent	113
8. Meeting Your Own Needs	129
9. Building a Confident, Growing Relationship	147
10. Leaving Your Child a Positive Legacy	167
Notes	187

getting to KNOW today's adult CHILD

Do you remember 1961? JFK brought a youthful style to the White House; the first astronauts went into space, and we all watched on black-and-white TV. Most agree life was simpler then; certainly our culture was far more predictable. Everyone knew the script— young people finished high school and either went to college or got a job. For some, their first job was in the military. With or without college, readily available full-time employment meant that independence was just around the corner. They would find their own apartment and start to save for the day when they married and began a family.

That was fifty years ago. Then, if you had an adult son or daughter, the grown child typically lived near you. After the child married (most married young), the young couple often would join the whole clan for Sunday dinner and for holidays at your home, though otherwise the young couple would live their own lives. As parents, now and then you might have watched the grandchildren, and when you retired, the grown children made their pilgrimage to Florida or California to see you, usually

with grandkids in tow. Everyone knew their role and played it quite well. If life was not always happy, at least it was stable.

THOSE AMAZING MILLENNIALS

Fifty years ago, this book could not have been written. But things have changed during the past five decades, and the predictable is no more. It began with the tumultuous sixties that overturned a way of life Americans had taken for granted. The birth-control pill came first, followed by legal abortion; together they fueled the so-called sexual revolution. Vietnam and political intrigue led to Watergate and a disillusioned public. Divorce became commonplace, and the “traditional” family diminished in importance as our culture became more mobile and diverse.

Nowhere have these changes been more poignantly felt than by parents of those amazing and puzzling young people we call Generation Y (or the Millennials or the Mosaics), as well as some of the younger Gen Xers. Among the changes affecting the contour of the family circle are:

1. Adult children may live more than one hundred miles away, often out of state.
2. Or, adult children, increasingly, may be moving back to the nest—sometimes with their own children.
3. Many adult children don’t marry until their late twenties or their thirties.
4. Some adult children have live-in partners of the opposite sex, sharing their lives and sometimes their checking accounts, but not marrying. They’re convinced marriage is too risky, at least for a while.
5. Adult children may seem less driven than their parents.

It is easy enough to try to lay blame for the changing, unsettled times solely on uncontrollable factors. Yet many of today’s boomer parents have to look no further than their own experiences in the sixties and seventies, and often the actions of their own parents. For it was then that some of their parents no longer felt compelled to stay in marriages that were not bringing

them the emotional satisfaction they desired. Many young people decided that sex was too beautiful to be kept for marriage, that multiple partners were the wave of the future. The pleasures of recreational drug use and sexual experimentation drew many, and social stigmas waned.

Today 40 percent of our young adults grew up as children of divorce. The Gen Xers, in particular, were labeled latchkey children, because they had keys to their homes after school, as their parents were away, working. Many of these children were more often shuffled and managed than parented. The Millennial generation, as we will see, were the “baby on board,” pampered generation, but their coming of age and seeming delaying of adulthood has also baffled parents.

With all these changes, many parents wonder now how to relate to their adult children. What is our role now? There are roles that parents can and should play in the lives of their adult children, as we plan to show in this book; but to play those roles, we need to better understand our grown sons and daughters. Let's begin by looking at the prevailing attitudes of our adult children.

THE GOOD LIFE?

Many of our young people want to establish a lifestyle similar to what their parents have, but they also see that, increasingly, the prospects for doing that are bleak, at least in the current economic crunch. We are all aware of the dismal unemployment statistics—by some measurements, young adults have suffered the most. Most of the jobs available are in the service categories, which do not offer a good wage. This means that great numbers of well-trained young people are looking for fewer and fewer high-paying positions.

Today's young adults may have watched their fathers or mothers loyally work for one or two employers in their careers. That is hardly an option anymore, and company loyalty to employees is pretty much a thing of the past. One factor in this is technology, which has led to downsizing, outsourcing, and greater competition in the marketplace. Another is the simple fact that many companies have found they can be more profitable

with fewer employees.

Today's young people have a different idea of what constitutes "the good life." They want to travel and enjoy hobbies and sports. They want satisfying relationships and freedom to explore and do new things. They don't have much patience with the notion of working decades to gradually rise to the lifestyle their parents enjoy.

This may be one of the most confusing questions in society and also in our families. Many adult children saw their parents spend way too much time on work. And then they saw their parents, just when life should be in the reward stage, laid off, downsized, fired, or facing an uncertain retirement. And so both generations struggle and question.

STRUGGLING TO GROW UP?

Many adult children display a dependence on their parents that is foreign to an older generation. Indeed, some researchers even suggest that "emerging adulthood"—the life stage from about 18 to 30—is a separate developmental stage similar to adolescence, which was first identified early in the twentieth century. Certainly today's economy is one factor; however, this phenomenon has been growing for two decades. Whatever the reason, many young adults seem to be struggling to grow up. In asking for parental help, they seem to be saying, "I need more from you, Mom and Dad."

In some adult children, this is expressed in an expectation that Mom and Dad will fund portions of their lives. The signs that pop up at televised college football games reflect the cry of a generation, "Hi, Mom! Send money." In other children, it comes when adult children insist that their parents spend inordinate amounts of time helping them or caring for their children. Some parents feel trapped or overwhelmed by these demands. One young adult answered the phone to hear her mother say, "Honey, I am calling to see if Dad and I can bring your children by for you and Bruce to keep tonight. We have an invitation for a dinner date tonight." Obviously, this grandmother was wanting some relief.

And some parents may feel as if they neglected their children when

they were younger, due to stresses of work or other factors. Parents who know that they gave their children less than enough time or attention may now feel the guilt of this neglect. Such guilt makes them less able to deal well with their adult children.

At the same time, some of those who need more from their parents stay away from home because they can't handle the complications of their families' lives. When Gary's son, Derek, was in the university, he remarked one Christmas: "Five of my best friends did not go home for the holiday. Their parents are divorced and they didn't want the hassle of trying to relate to them separately. They stayed on campus feeling as if they no longer had homes and families."

MORE ON THE MILLENNIALS

In this book we are talking about relating to your eighteen- to thirty-five-year-old child. Of course, some of the discussion will also help you understand and deal with older adult children, especially those Gen Xers in their late thirties and forties. But the focus is on those young adults who are members of Generation Y, or the Millennials or Mosaics—those born roughly between 1980 and 1995. While it may seem artificial and unfair to gather all Millennials into one pot, these young people do seem to share enough attitudes to make them a distinct group.

Knowing how great numbers of them think and feel can be helpful to you when you are at wits' end trying to understand your child.

This very large (75 million) generation has been described as optimistic, civic-minded, and socially aware—one author went so far as calling them possibly "the next Greatest Generation." However, they are also described as having a "sense of entitlement" and as "trophy kids" raised during a "child-centric" era, in contrast to Gen X, many of whom were raised as latchkey kids. Millennials may have overblown expectations for their work—when they can find work, which, as we have seen, is very difficult for many of them right now.

In work, school, and relationships, this generation tends to be more team oriented. They aren't just expert at technology—they take it for

granted. They are comfortable with diversity. They are confident, but also very relational. And, say human-resource experts, they are hard workers. At the same time, while many were encouraged to achieve as they were growing up, they are less driven than their boomer elders.

Also, as we have seen, many of Gen Y are taking a long time to grow up. In previous generations, young people between ages eighteen and twenty-one were able to take responsibility for their lives. Generation Y, as Gen X before it, is maturing more slowly; we watch some of them beginning to take responsibility for their lives around age thirty.

The reasons for the longer maturing are not crucial, nor should our Generation Y children be criticized for the pressures (and diversions) that society and their parents may have given them. The point is their entry into true adulthood typically has been delayed. That raises a question. What is adulthood?

“EMERGING ADULTS”

In American society we used to have predictable times and means for marking the transition to adulthood, such as finishing high school, getting married, having children, owning a home, and settling into a career. But as Jeffrey Arnett, who coined the term “emerging adulthood,” comments:

To be a young American today is to experience both excitement and uncertainty, wide-open possibility and confusion, new freedoms and new fears.

The rise in the ages of entering marriage and parenthood, the lengthening of higher education and prolonged job instability during the twenties reflects the development of a new period of life for young people in the United States and other industrialized societies. . . . It is a new and historically unprecedented period of the life course. . . . [that] should be recognized as a distinct new period of life that will be around for many generations to come.¹

This is not the first time that the definition of “adulthood” has been ad-

justed in our society. When college or other advanced education became the norm for a large share of American men and women, the deferral of adulthood began. Young people delayed marriage, had their children when they were older, and started careers later.

Today as Millennials finish their schooling (and they are the most educated generation in our history), they are not always ready to tackle the challenge of jobs and families, a trend that has been developing for a number of years and has only been heightened by the recent recession. In their inability or reticence, as Arnett notes, they are creating a new phase of life between dependent childhood and independent adulthood. And, some see them as doing this on purpose. Career counselor Rebecca Haddock has noted, "Many of the students I work with are planning to return home after college. It's not viewed as a last resort. It's part of a plan."² Recent surveys have shown more than three-quarters of college seniors plan to live at home for a time.

These young people who move home can be divided into two groups: the *planners* and the *strugglers*. The planners expect to return home and to live there until they feel financially prepared to live on their own. The strugglers simply go home. They don't want to struggle alone and need the security of home.

A QUESTION OF EXPECTATIONS

What does everyone expect? Good question. What we have been talking about so far is the matter of expectations. We parents have some expectations that are very different from those held by our adult children. What we consider to be failure or immaturity may be regarded in a completely different light by our adult children. They may see their actions as careful planning, as normal and necessary steps in achieving their goals.

These differing viewpoints would not be so conflict-producing if our expectations were only for our own lives; but when our expectations lean on our children and seem to create pressures for them, trouble is just around the corner. And when our children expect certain things of us that we are not able or prepared to give them, we feel pressured. And then,

when none of this is openly expressed, the pressure escalates and the stage is set for a confrontation.

Most parents, for example, expect some time for themselves when their children are grown. Instead they may feel put upon by their young adult children. Some parents watch as their children return home after college and take up residence in the home. When the adult children marry and do set up their own household, their parents may discover that the child care never ends. As one father said some years ago, “I thought that when the kids were grown, they would take care of themselves, but that isn’t the case. When they marry and have children, my wife and I have that many more people to take care of.” This particular family was very stable and loving and the father did not mean that the children were moving back home; rather, there was a level of emotional dependence he hadn’t expected.

Parents also find themselves in confrontations with their adult children over other dashed expectations. Perhaps your children have given you disappointment, frustration, and concern from one of the following situations: doing poorly in college, wasting time and money; finishing college but then wandering and/or moving back home for a while to “get their feet on the ground”; having a marriage end in divorce in a few years, perhaps moving back home with a child or two; spending far beyond their means; or making lifestyle and employment choices that turn out disastrously.

A MORE POSITIVE FUTURE

In spite of profound changes during the past fifty years that have affected many families, we do see some hope on the horizon. Here in America we still have many parents and children who work through and enjoy their new relationships as the child becomes an adult. Many parents genuinely enjoy being with their adult children; several referred to their grown children as “good friends.” And a variety of polls show that both the Millennials and Generation X want their marriages and families to succeed and “get it right” the first time, unlike their parents, whom they perceive as having rushed into marriages that later broke up. Like you, your children

care about their future, and they are wrestling to know what to do.

Several authorities have been studying the impact of the Great Recession on Millennials. One 2010 study notes that while Millennials have been disproportionately affected by the Great Recession, they are “more upbeat than their elders” about their futures. The report also notes that there is less of a generation gap between Millennials and their parents than in past eras.³

It is these emerging desires in the hearts and minds of young adults that hold potential for a more positive future in marriage and family relationships. As parents of these young people, we must make every effort to assist them when they turn to us for help. We dare not ignore their desires.