

The new normal for prolonged parenting is that parental ties unravel slowly rather than being cut quickly.

Prolonged Parenting

Extending the Limits of Active Parenting

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There was a time when entry into parenthood and adulthood was signalled primarily by biological milestones. The act of becoming a parent profoundly changes one's receptivity to being parented; over time, being parented is not only less welcomed, but arguably less important as well. Although most emerging adults do not identify their entry into parenthood as the core of their adult identity, many

emerging adults who do become parents have indicated that the process of becoming a parent was in fact the key marker that *made* them an adult.¹

This historical pattern has now changed. Whereas "teenage pregnancy" still occurs, it has decreased steadily over the last three decades, from about 30 births per 1,000 teenage women in 1974 to 12 in 2009.² The mean age of mothers at the time



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of delivery was 29.7 years in 2011 – a two-year increase over the past two decades.³ There now tends to be an increasing separation between our reproductive capacity and transition to parenthood. The surge of hormones during puberty is no longer a sanctioned signal to reproduce, but rather a sexual force to be explored, expressed and reproductively managed for the next 10, 15 and sometimes 20 years of what some perceive as a prolonged period of adolescence.

The resulting absence of parental responsibilities, and consequent lengthening of our period of being parented, has implications for both children and parents. Most significantly, as outlined in the Vanier Institute's December 2012 edition of *Fascinating*

Families, there are more generations “living under one roof” as children in their 20s either stay at or return home as a result of student debt loads, poor employment prospects, larger parental homes and increased cultural diversity. The changes are dramatic: in 1981, 26.9% of young adults aged 20–29 lived in the parental home – a proportion that grew to 42.3% by 2011.⁴

This growth is even more dramatic among 25- to 29-year-olds, for whom the proportion has more than doubled, from 11.3% in 1981 to 25.2% in 2011. Since young women tend to form unions earlier than young men, approximately 47% of men in their 20s lived in the parental home, compared with 38% of women in this age group. The number of Gen Xers (those born in the early 1970s) who return home has *tripled* since the first wave of baby boomers (those born in the early 1950s), from approximately 11% to 30%.⁵

Emerging adulthood equals prolonged parenthood

While the notion of a more slowly emerging adulthood⁶ has been the focus of numerous human development studies, less attention has been paid to the impact of these changes on the *parents* of these young adults. “Prolonged parenthood” refers to a period in mid-life when adult children either stay in the family home longer than expected or return after a period of living on their own.⁷ The effects are significant: in all aspects of parenting, from provision and instruction to discipline, parents are on the job for a longer period of time, with extended responsibilities that can result in strained and deepened relations with children, increased financial vulnerability due to extended dependence and a loss or modification of some of their own aspirations and goals as adults.

Of course, when considering prolonged parenthood, one can easily argue that parenting is a *lifelong* commitment. The investment at the outset is straightforward – young children are fully dependent beings and there is no choice but to give them the care they need. Nevertheless, the job of parents is to shift this absolute dependence to some measure of independence. It is every parent's evolutionary and generational mandate to prepare their children to take over the reins of their own responsibility and care. And while most parents want to love their children forever, most do not want to actively *parent* them forever. Despite the strong intention to lead their children to independence, for many parents,

the current normative and economic context may be undermining their best efforts to raise (in a timely way) an independent, responsible adult.

The time required to accomplish this task has not only lengthened considerably, but the essential goal of the exercise has become less clear. Many parents are experiencing anxiety about their children's accumulated debt, their apparent reluctance and/or inability to get a good job, their disinterest in actively participating in family events and the overall fact that they don't seem to be in a hurry to "get settled." Many parents are also beginning to lose perspective on their own developmental journey, including concerns about launching, money and their own freedom to live life in a different way. But, for both emerging adult children and their parents, the one area of common ground seems to be ambivalence about what to expect and confusion about what it means to be an adult living at home.⁸

The focus is often on individual development issues for these young adults: they are hanging on too long, floundering and facing a tough economy that makes it difficult to launch into their own independent lives. This situation has been referred to as "arrested development."⁹ Personal responsibility has been reinforced in the popular press with language that emphasizes phrases such as "adultescents" who are "slouching toward adulthood."¹⁰ Media stories often focus on the negative impact of moving home on financial planning and how this affects the ability of parents to save for retirement, frequently referencing how some young adults spend on discretionary items such as cellphones and nights out with apparent disregard for the costs associated with living at home.¹¹

Although issues of individual development are important, broader forces are at play. Increased life expectancy has changed the structure of the lifespan and its various stages. Adulthood in particular is longer and more complex, resulting in the lengthening of particular life stages. Parenting practices have changed, as men and women in their 20s and 30s have arguably been the subjects of some of the most intensive and scrutinized parenting practices ever. The proliferation of parenting information through books, the media and the Internet has meant that parenting has been "professionalized" with high expectations for what it means to be a "good parent," raising concerns about parents overinvesting in children, being overinvolved in their schooling and inadvertently fostering an extended relationship of dependency.



For some young adults, this experience may extend reliance on their parents to help them navigate an uncertain future with limited resources. Young adults are much more likely now to attend university, with approximately one-quarter of young men and one-third of young women holding a university degree, resulting in a series of changes that include not only leaving home later, but also forming unions and having children later as well (or not at all).¹² For example, the average age at first marriage in 2004 was 30.5 for men and 28.5 for women; the age during first birth for a woman is now at 29 – significant rises compared to previous generations.¹³ Employment prospects for young men and women are also often poorer than expected, resulting in a prolonged period of substantial educational debt and slowed financial independence.

Prolonged parenthood: The new normal?

For young adults, normative changes that remove the stigma and expectation for an early launch, combined with heightened financial pressures, make staying at home a comfortable and pragmatic option. Parents may have a harder time pushing their children out of the nest, given their parental investments and awareness of the financial challenges their children face. Furthermore, whereas the dominant story of young adults staying home tends to focus on how they can take advantage of a good thing, one must also consider the degree to which parents have created dependencies of their own as part of this process. Are they reluctant to let go and give them a good push out of the nest?

The idea that active parenting is "prolonged" raises the underlying premise that it is "too long" *in reference to normative expectations*. Inherently normative, studies of lifespan and intergenerational relations are also subject to cultural and historical change. For parents in the prolonged parenting



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phase, their expectations are shaped by their *own* experience of leaving the nest and becoming independent. Accordingly, the nostalgia for a clean break can sometimes give rise to worries about the “lingering on,” the return home and the lack of apparent initiative to move on. There is a resulting tendency to uphold a perspective that prolonged parenting is unexpected and surprising when compared to one’s own (more rapid) developmental trajectory as a young adult.

Nevertheless, current patterns of behaviour have begun to establish a “new normal” that an adult child returning home has become common, predictable and normative – a model in which parental ties unravel slowly rather than being cut quickly.¹⁴ This emerging norm has resulted in reduced stigma associated with living at home and reinforcement of its acceptance.

Although the literature in this area is limited, there are some interesting trends in the way parents report on their experience of prolonged parenting. The lingering belief that prolonged parenting is itself non-normative can give rise to strained relations simply because of the failure of their adult children to meet expectations for self-sustainability.¹⁵ Specifically, these strained relations can be the result of

compromised plans for the future, a lack of clarity associated with carrying out roles (as both parent and child when the child is an adult), ambiguity with respect to household responsibilities and conflicts with respect to social and practical support.¹⁶ Moving back home or lingering too long at home can also be accompanied by a host of resentments expressed by parents rooted in the exercise of everyday living, such as cleanliness, scheduling, accountability and communication regarding activities, discipline and the use of space.¹⁷

The ambiguity of the “in-between” status of young adulthood and the associated lack of normative clarity are also reflected in generational differences in views about what it means to become an adult. Whereas traditional criteria for recognizing adulthood have focused on getting married, becoming a parent or purchasing a home, emerging adults do not identify these as necessary aspects of being an adult – until they become a parent themselves.^{18, 19} Emerging adults placed emphasis on accepting “responsibility for the consequences of your actions,” as a key indicator of adulthood, whereas parents are more likely to emphasize “becoming less self-oriented” by developing greater consideration of others.²⁰

Positive aspects of prolonged parenthood

Nevertheless, research suggests that, in general, parents are adapting to these changed living arrangements and reporting positive aspects of parent-child relations with their adult children living at home. While there are typically many points of tension, this is also a time when the parent-child relationship begins to shift from “parent and child” to something that at least approaches “near equals,” which includes a different kind of intimacy and the potential for mutual respect.²¹

In particular, parents report higher levels of satisfaction when adult children are more independent, mature and willing to provide support as well as receive it.²² Research has shown that when young adults demonstrated movement toward independence through activities such as progressing toward an educational degree or contributing financially (e.g. room and board), parents expressed more satisfaction with the relationship.²³ In the same vein, both young adults and parents identified “relational maturity” as the most essential criteria for adulthood²⁴ with implications for enhancing the positive valence of their own relationship. Furthermore, when children *do* move back into the parental home, one of the keys for a successful transition is the ability of parents to shift from treating their children as adolescents to treating them as adults through their recognition of their children’s change in maturity.²⁵

Style matters

Parenting style also affects how parents and emerging adults experience their time together. One of the least adaptive approaches to parenting during emerging adulthood involved high control and low responsiveness.²⁶ Efforts on the part of parents to apply excessive control at a time when their emerging adult child wishes to exert his or her own independence is likely to result in reduced satisfaction and increased conflict in the relationship. As the authors suggest, even disengagement or lack of involvement may serve to be a more adaptive parenting approach given the developmental importance of sought-after independence. If there is advice to be given in what is usually a complicated relationship, the authors summarize by suggesting that “parents are most effective during emerging adulthood when they talk to their children and do what they can to maintain the relationship while simultaneously granting greater levels of autonomy and forming new boundaries that are based substantially less on parental control.”²⁷

In the same way that emerging adults are “in between” a variety of statuses and roles in their lives,

so too are parents “in between” the intensity of parenting adolescents and a period of anticipated empty nest. This is a time of mixed emotions that can include resentment and delight, letting go and holding on, and exercising authority while opening to a new adult relationship. In the end, prolonged parenting presents both challenges and benefits, and is part of the ever-changing family dynamics.

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¹ J.J. Arnett (2000), “Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development from the Late Teens Through the Twenties,” *American Psychologist*, 55: 469–480.

² HRSDC, *Indicators of Well-being in Canada*, <http://bit.ly/13k4VLN>.

³ Statistics Canada (2013), Table 102-4504 – Mean Age of Mother at Time of Delivery (Live Births), Canada, Provinces and Territories, Annual (Years), CANSIM (database), <http://bit.ly/15O3ng7>.

⁴ Statistics Canada (2012), <http://bit.ly/VcjsWX>.

⁵ P. Beaupré, P. Turcotte and A. Milan (2006), “Junior Comes Back Home: Trends and Predictors of Returning to the Parental Home,” *Canadian Social Trends*, Ottawa: Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 11-008 (Winter): 28–34.

⁶ J.J. Arnett (2004), *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties*. New York: Oxford University Press.

⁷ N.M. Putney and V.L. Bengston (2002), “Families, Intergenerational Relationships, and Kinkeeping in Midlife,” *Handbook of Midlife Development*, New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.

⁸ L.J. Nelson, L.M. Padilla-Walker, J. Carroll, S. Madsen, C. Barry and S. Badger (2007), “If You Want Me to Treat You Like an Adult, Start Acting Like One! Comparing the Criteria That Emerging Adults and Their Parents Have for Adulthood,” *Journal of Family Psychology*, 21, No. 4: 665–674.

⁹ J.E. Côté (2000), *Arrested Adulthood: The Changing Nature of Maturity and Identity*, New York: New York University Press.

¹⁰ Sally Koslow (2012), *Slouching Toward Adulthood: Observations from the Not-So-Empty Nest*, New York: Viking Press.

¹¹ G. Marr (2012), “Moving Back Home and Still Not Saving,” *Financial Post online*, October 6, 2012, <http://bit.ly/Q18UXF>.

¹² The Vanier Institute of the Family (2010), *Families Count IV: Profiling Canadian Families*, Ottawa: The Vanier Institute of the Family.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Beaupré, Turcotte and Milan.

¹⁵ Putney and Bengston.

¹⁶ Beaupré, Turcotte and Milan.

¹⁷ Arnett (2004).

¹⁸ Arnett (2000).

¹⁹ Nelson et al.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Arnett (2004).

²² Beaupré, Turcotte and Milan.

²³ W.S. Aquilino (1996), “The Returning Adult Child and Parental Experience at Midlife,” in C. Ryff, M. Mallick Seltzer (Eds.), *The Parental Experience in Midlife*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

²⁴ Nelson et al.

²⁵ Arnett (2004).

²⁶ L.J. Nelson, L.M. Padilla-Walker, K.J. Christensen, C. Evans and J.S. Carroll (2011), *Journal of Youth Adolescence*, 40: 730–743.

²⁷ Ibid.