

THErapy MATTERS: The Boomerang Kids  
By Sue Mayo and Helen Muscolo

The phone rings, a deep man voice on the other end says, “Hi Mom, I’ve got some bad news”. Immediately, thoughts go to horrible places of epic tragedies. What terrible thing has befallen this sweet 22 year old recent college graduate! With mind racing and thoughts whirling, trying not to exude panic, the careful reply of “what happened?” is given. He reports that he has been unable to find a job, is out of money and can no longer pay the rent SO.....he is moving back home. Elation that he is not going to jail, has not wrecked the car or gotten a girl pregnant is soon replaced by thoughts of Oh no! There goes my sanctuary, my peace and quiet.... not to mention there goes my reasonable food bill!

This is a scenario that many parents are facing, as the tough job market combined with rising costs of living has altered the landscape for the 20-something generation. The media has dubbed them the “boomerang kids”.....children who leave but somehow come back. While this is a catchy phrase, it is misleading. When one throws a boomerang out into the air, it comes back virtually unchanged. Yet the adult child who returns home at 22 is not the same child who moved into the dorm at age 18. Adult children moving back home after years of freedom from parental oversight can be a recipe for disaster IF it is not negotiated well. This is also combined with the parents having finally navigated the emotional letting go of the child and embracing their “empty nest”. This move back home signals big changes for all.

Vital to the success of an adult child living at home is communication; clear communication. Without this, conflict will likely ensue. Mom and Dad may have very different expectations from one another and the child may think that since they are now an adult, the rules no longer apply. One family we worked with had the scenario above unfold and came to our office in utter chaos. Mom and Dad were having frequent conflict because of their different expectations of “Junior” and “Junior” was finding himself irritated and angry that he was unable to just come and go as he pleased as he had done prior to moving back home. This was not a happy home. We needed to find a way to untangle this mess and get this family back to a place of peaceful coexistence.

Assumptions abounded. Dad believed his son would get up by 7:30 am every day and hit the job trail in a no nonsense approach. Mom wanted to be able to cook him a nice breakfast, chat, catch up on his life and reconnect with him emotionally. Grown son wanted none of this, instead wanting to operate on his own schedule as he had been doing for years. By keying into the chief concerns each family member voiced – be productive, emotionally connect, feel independent.....we were able to help this family achieve some common ground and begin a discussion to put their household back into order.

Prior to an adult child moving back home, it is recommended that a thorough discussion occur in order to avoid the type of disaster that transpired above. One way to approach this would be for all family members to make a list of the main concerns that arise for them in anticipation of a move. We recall working with a family wherein the mother was quite concerned about the concrete ways her adult daughter returning home would affect her – things such as the cleanliness of the household and the likelihood of guests at all hours. In contrast, the father was less concerned about these practical inconveniences but quite alarmed at the expense of an additional person in the household at a time when the couple needed to be stepping up their retirement savings. By helping these parents articulate and empathize with each other’s concerns, we were able to shift them into problem solving and involve their adult daughter (who understandably had concerns of her own) in the discussion regarding solutions. The end result was the creation of household rules that all felt comfortable with, and a set amount that the daughter would contribute monthly as “rent” to help alleviate increased household costs.

Understanding the reason for a move home will also assist families in establishing a realistic time frame. While money is always a factor, some adult children return home with the lofty goal of saving a substantial sum of money for graduate school, a new car, or a future move to a new city while others view it as nothing more than a temporary place to lay one’s head until a job is found. Regardless of the reason that your son or daughter returns home, we recommend setting a time table with your child for how long they anticipate residing with you, and an exit strategy for what needs to happen to allow them to move. Of course this is a guideline only and can be readjusted as needed, but it is an important part of defining expectations and avoiding misunderstandings. We can remember one particular family wherein the adult son’s plan was to save \$5000 to allow for the beginning of a financial cushion prior to moving out. While this goal seemed

realistic enough, this young man was missing the skills and discipline to actually follow through, and his parents by contrast were feeling silently frustrated as they watched what appeared to be his reckless spending habits. What came out in our meeting with them were the parents' feelings that they were not allowed to ask questions or give advice – their son was an adult, after all. While boundaries do need to be watched and many an adult child is extra sensitive to being parented, our experience with this generation is that the vast majority of our sons and daughters are quite open to our help. The joke here is that one of the most important lessons our children learn in college is that their parents aren't quite so stupid after all.

Finally, while it is understandable that parents are likely to have their own (valid) concerns regarding Junior's homecoming, it is valuable for them to retain a little perspective on the situation. Chances are, Junior himself is not feeling so enthusiastic about the return to the family home. Yet if done right, this situation offers a wonderful opportunity for parents and adult child to rediscover each other in a new light. And it can't hurt to remember that decades from now, the table will be turned and it may be YOU that comes knocking!

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