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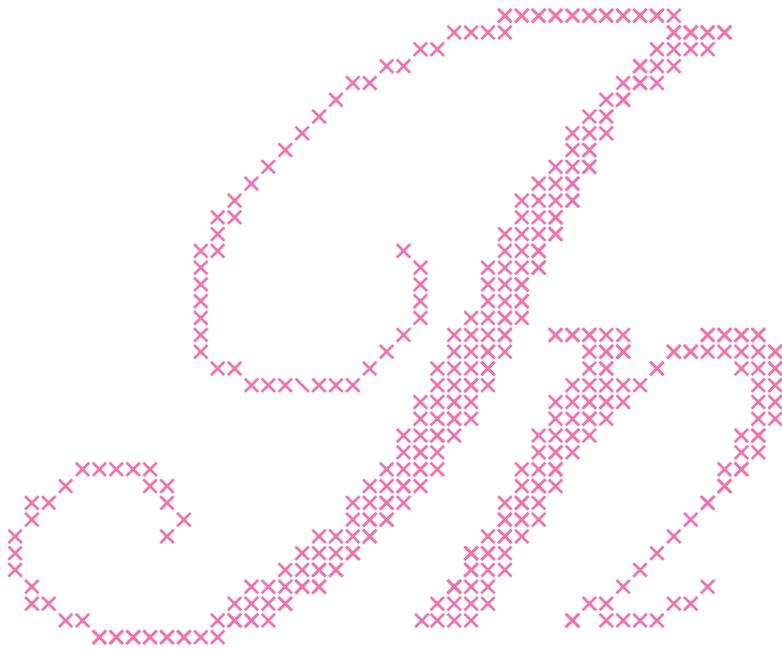
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THE DISMAL JOB MARKET
HAS FORCED MANY UN- OR UNDER-
EMPLOYED TWENTY-
SOMETHINGS TO MOVE BACK IN
WITH THEIR PARENTS. AND
THAT MAY NOT BE SO BAD. THE SECRET
UPSIDE TO A DOWN ECONOMY

BY LINDSY VAN GELDER
PHOTOGRAPHED BY PHIL TOLEDANO



THE SWEEP OF HISTORY, our most intimate relationships are often left in the dust. Who would have imagined, when the interstate highway system was created in the '50s, that one of its legacies would be the diaspora of the extended family? When people whose families had lived in one place for generations could relocate easily, often they did. The feminist movement was another game changer. As women's job opportunities (and expectations of help at home) began to grow, divorce rates started to skyrocket. And in yet another example of huge external forces affecting family life, the post-crash economy is now radically changing the relationship between parents and their adult children.

Start with the numbers: One in five 25- to 34-year-olds is living at home today, and an even larger proportion of that age group is not financially independent. A 2009 Purdue University study showed that 79 percent of young adults (mean age: 25.2) got money from their parents at least once a year; 48 percent received money every month. For parents who still own the big-enough houses their children grew up in, letting the kids move back often seems like a no-brainer.

Many of these young adults are unemployed, and in this economy they might spend dispiriting months squirreled up in their childhood rooms in their pajamas, sending hundreds of

résumés into cyberspace without getting a nibble. Of those who do have jobs, many are underemployed. In a recent Charles Schwab online survey, only 28 percent of those living at home were jobless. Most of the rest were working but couldn't afford to strike out on their own. College graduates in many fields are now asked to work for nothing, as a way to get a foot in the door—but often, when their time is up, they aren't offered a job; they're simply replaced by the next wave of cheap labor. Or they may be burdened with a level of college-loan debt that was unheard of in their parents' day. The cost of tuition jumped 439 percent from 1982 to 2008, compared with a 147 percent increase in median family income; over the past decade, student borrowing has more than doubled. Even finding paid work doesn't solve everything. Twenty-somethings are frequently overqualified for the entry-level jobs they snag—and still unable to earn anywhere near enough to be self-supporting.

Given the difficulties these young adults face, it's not surprising that their parents step in and help. But for many families, a gesture born of love, kindness and obligation—where else are your kids going to go? Where else would you *want* them to go?—brings in its wake a complicated mix of emotions and practical concerns. And some effects are surprisingly positive.

As one mother put it, "I pretty much know what my husband is going to say in any given situation. Having my son around has been terrific. It's great to have another interesting adult at the dinner table."

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MOST WOMEN NEVER expected to share a home with their adult children—partly because when these mothers were young, they fought hard



for their independence. “To us, moving back home was the last thing we would ever do,” says Elaine Mills, an illustrator from Stonington, Connecticut, whose 33-year-old daughter is living with her while she goes back to school. Many women now in this cohort got out of their own parents’ homes in part because it was the only way they could carry on a sex life; today it’s assumed that young unmarried adults aren’t celibate, no matter where they

live. So if a mother is dealing with an adult child still at home, she’s probably also dealing with that kid’s significant other, which often causes strain. “I’m not crazy about my daughter’s boyfriend,” says one woman. “I don’t like the way he talks down to her when he’s here, and it’s hard for me to watch the way they interact. I’m trying to stay out of it, but it’s tough not to eavesdrop when you’re living in the same house.”

Even when dating is not an issue, renegotiating the child-parent relationship creates big questions about what constitutes appropriately supportive parenting. Two of Phyllis Lombardi Siclari’s adult children live with her and her husband in West Haven, Connecticut. She makes dinner for all every night, frequently does her son’s laundry and doesn’t expect the kids to pay rent, although they are theoretically responsible for their credit card

charges, cell phone bills and car-insurance payments. “But they are always short,” she says. “It never fails: We have to front them.” The kids eventually pay her back, but she worries that she shouldn’t bail them out. “I don’t want to cripple them, as do so many parents who let their kids walk all over them,” she explains. But it’s not easy to find the right balance between being supportive and letting adults be adults. And many people can’t provide help without putting themselves in financial jeopardy—a problem pervasive enough that the British have coined a term: KIPPERS, or kids in parents’ pockets eroding retirement savings.

There are also conflicting emotions about where to place blame for the situation. “You’re in a constant back-and-forth,” says Jane, a film editor who asked that her name be changed to spare her 25-year-old son’s feelings. “Is his joblessness somehow my fault? His fault? Or is the world just screwing with him?” She feels frustrated that her connections have not helped him land a spot, despite his Ivy League degree, and that the lessons of her work experience seem meaningless in this economy. When prospective employers behave thoughtlessly toward her son, “I start to feel the way I haven’t felt since he was little and someone was picking on him in the playground—almost a desire to hurt people,” she says. Her son has had an array of internships, jobs that ultimately didn’t go where he needed them to go and a year in New York subsidized by his parents. Jane describes him as “terrific,” with a great work ethic, “and I look at him and I think, Where is society now that it has no use for someone like this?” Then at bad moments, “my head starts to spin, and I think there must be something wrong with him that I just don’t see.”

Unlike teenagers, people in their twenties have a reasonable expectation that their adult lives are their own (even when they’re still reaping the benefits of living at home). And that can also be hard on their parents. “Emotionally, it’s a bit of a roller coaster,”

says Irene, a therapist who also asked to use another name for this story. She’s losing sleep over her 25-year-old daughter’s social life: “When Serena was in California, if she was out until 4 AM clubbing and driving with a few drinks in her, at least I didn’t know.” Now Irene lies in bed, unable to do more than doze until her daughter is safely in the driveway. Serena has been home for a year after an unpaid audio-technology internship and a part-time job—neither of which paid off in the ways she’d hoped—followed by the promise of an opportunity in Florida, which failed to materialize. She’s now back in school, but when she first went home, “she basically did nothing from December to May,” says Irene. “She wasn’t earning a penny. She slept a lot and surfed the Web and turned down most of our suggestions about getting work.”

The emotional challenges are further complicated by the huge logistical issues that loom when the empty nest refills—like how to provide adult children with health insurance. One of Siclari’s three kids doesn’t have it, although she’s painfully aware of the devastation that poor health can wreak: In 2005 her youngest child was a passenger in a car that was hit by a motorcycle traveling 100 miles per hour. “She broke both femurs, both knees, her right foot was severed, and her head was smashed like a pumpkin,” says Siclari. Her daughter recovered, but only after spending months in the hospital. At the time, she was covered by her parents’ insurance, but since then, she has had patches where she was without any coverage. Just recently, she went back to school and now has insurance that way, but Siclari’s son, who also lives at home, is still uninsured. “Most of the jobs out there don’t offer benefits,” says Siclari. And she and her husband—he is a CPA, she is the volunteer president of a charitable organization—can’t afford the thousands of dollars a year it would take to buy a policy for their son or add him to theirs.

Not surprisingly, there’s a lot of stress out there. Jane, who does buy

health coverage for her son, at a cost to her own savings, found herself snapping when he borrowed his father’s favorite coffee thermos and left it in his room, forcing her husband to tear the kitchen apart searching for it. “Sometimes a thermos isn’t just a thermos,” she says. “When kids are younger, there are no boundaries; they eat off their parents’ plates. But that’s supposed to end at a certain point.” Her son’s forgetting to bring back the thermos was a reminder of their continuing inability to achieve a kind of separation. “He’s trying to be a grownup, and he really wants to work,” says Jane, but the return of the unthinkingly self-centered child is also unquestionably part of her new reality. There are times, she admits, when she wants to tell him, “You’re eating all the food! Leave some for everyone else!”

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DESPITE THE DIFFICULTY of having to negotiate a new relationship with their children and renavigate their financial landscape, many women report that they *like* having their kids around. Twenty-somethings are usually better at carrying heavy boxes, tweaking the router, driving at night and finding the best new music than their parents are, and the bumpy process of generations learning to coexist can have surprising payoffs. For starters, parents get a ringside seat to the maturation process. “Some of it is little things,” says Lori Bezahler, a non-profit executive from Brooklyn whose 22-year-old stepdaughter is working long hours without steady pay to try to break into film and TV production. Bezahler’s husband is a labor activist, and she respects the way her stepdaughter can now assert herself in discussions about her lifestyle. “She stands up to him about her hours, as an adult who has decided, not as a kid who has to justify herself,” says Bezahler. “I really admire little things like that . . . which are actually huge.”

Mills says that when her daughter moved back home after four years of teaching in Africa, “we each had our own ways of doing things, and we

were used to having our own space.” The daughter made it clear that she expected Mills to make some changes: using cloth napkins at dinner, for instance, and passing up any product containing high-fructose corn syrup. “At first I thought, Oh my gosh, give me a break,” Mills says. But she decided she needed to be “more empathetic” with her daughter’s beliefs. That didn’t mean letting her daughter win every point as much as it meant cultivating an open attitude and finding common ground—in their case, quite literally: The two tended a garden together, and Mills’s daughter has taken over some of the cooking. “It has been a good experience,” says Mills.

And why shouldn’t it be? For most of history, families have stuck close together. Perhaps the problem isn’t that our children are staying—it’s that we’ve convinced ourselves that in a sane world, they will leave. “Many of our ideas about normative family practices only go back to the period of postwar prosperity that gave birth to the baby boomers,” says Katherine Newman, PhD, dean of the Krieger School of Arts and Sciences at Johns Hopkins University and author of *The Accordion Family*, a book about adult children at home that will be published next year. In fact, the expectation that American adults would have a period of independence between childhood and marriage dates only from the late 1960s. For a change, the nation wasn’t facing a depression, a housing shortage or a world war; the number of people in college increased; and the age of marriage rose (after hitting a low in the ’50s and early ’60s). Parents who frame the current situation in terms of their offspring’s “failure to launch” need to understand that they, not their kids, are the anomalies.

They also need to be aware of how different it is to come of age now, says Craig Fabrikant, PhD, a clinical psychologist at Hackensack University Medical Center in New Jersey: “Because of postwar prosperity, our generation got to where we were going quickly and did phenomenally well.” But at the same time, people who

grew up in the hippie-influenced late ’60s and ’70s had fewer material needs. “None of us drove fancy cars or needed technological stuff, and it was normal to live on Hamburger Helper,” he says. Today’s celebrity-saturated, designer-label generation has the opposite story line: high expectations regarding how and where to live, followed by dashed hopes of ever getting there. It’s the American Dream unreeled in reverse.

But attitudes vary wildly across cultures, according to Hopkins’s Newman. Her research looked at various countries, including Sweden and Denmark, where, thanks to welfare-state safety nets, most young adults are independent. In Italy, unmarried children have

not without conflicts, is still typically part of a worldview in which, as she puts it, “the generations feel responsible for each other.” These young adults may have translated for their parents in important situations from an early age; now they could be staying close because their help is needed in the family business. “They might hesitate to move far away when they have families of their own,” Chin adds, “and they may eventually feel they can’t send their parents off to a nursing home.” Everyone benefits.

Bezahler says she and her stepdaughter have entered “a whole new phase of our relationship. The dynamic has shifted from her reliance on us to something more mutual.” Her stepdaughter is reading biographies of Bob Dylan and Marilyn Monroe, and Bezahler and her husband enjoy



TWENTY-SOMETHINGS ARE USUALLY BETTER AT CARRYING HEAVY BOXES, TWEAKING THE ROUTER, DRIVING AT NIGHT AND FINDING THE BEST NEW MUSIC.

always been expected to live at home, regardless of economic conditions. In Japan, parents of boomerangers tend to be even more upset than their American counterparts and “inclined to see things in terms of personal failure,” theirs or their children’s, says Newman.

U.S. families should perhaps take a leaf from the experience of recent immigrants, for whom family teamwork is still the norm, notes Margaret M. Chin, PhD, associate professor of sociology at Hunter College and Graduate Center in New York. Chin studies Latino, black and Asian immigrant families, often at points of crisis (like the economic collapse in Manhattan’s Chinatown after 9/11). A strong sense that your family members will pitch in to help you is an antidote to an economy where “the company isn’t committed to you,” she says. Among her immigrant students, the experience of adult children living at home, while



talking about what these icons meant to them. “But she’s also been able to give us an understanding of how those celebrities fit into contemporary culture and how, for example, this woman who was such a complicated vision of femininity, and who had such baggage, can play out in someone like Lady Gaga taking that stuff into a more empowered direction,” Bezahler says. She adds that her stepdaughter “was always an interesting kid—but she was an interesting *kid*.” Now they’re getting to know each other more as equals. Says Newman: “This is a time that can lead to a real quality relationship between adults. Maybe even a better one than you would have had if the child hadn’t come home.”

