

Now That They've Grown: Parenting Our Young Adults

Peter Pan, the personification of the child who never grows up, is just a fairy tale. In reality, our children do grow up, become their own person and leave home – and it all happens much faster than we can fathom. How do parents who have been ruling the roost for some 18 years of a child's life adjust to the role of parenting a young adult? And, how can parents prepare for this major and inevitable shift in their home life. MOSAIC staff members Robert Long and Nancy Kyle whose families are all in the midst of these growing pains – and joys – have these thoughts to share.



Letting Loose the Reigns, Little by Little

At the age of 16, kids can get their license; at 18, they graduate high school and head off to university, college or work; at 19, they become the age of majority. There is no one magic age at which we say *okay, you're an adult now and responsible for your own life, your own decisions and well being*. But, the transition really starts at thirteen, when they begin high school. Thirteen is a good time to start inviting them to be responsible for their actions – which means less punishing and more dealing with and accepting the consequences.

"One thing we did was to give our kids control of their finances at an early age," says Nancy, "we'd give them money a little at a time and they were expected to save for their university tuition. It allowed them to be individuals and responsible – but it also meant that we couldn't question them every time they bought a ticket for a concert. Once in a while they would mess up, but basically they were very frugal with their spending and all of them graduated from university with money in the bank."

Letting go of the reigns is not a sudden occurrence; they should be loosened little by little. It will be an easier transition for both parent and child.

When the *Shoulds* Become *Could's*

Eighteen is another magic number - the final cutting of the umbilical cord. It's the cut-off point when they take responsibility for themselves. You no longer get consulted and your role changes to simply being supportive. It's when the *shoulds* become *could's*. You literally need to develop a different language. You have to be careful how you phrase things and be aware of how they are hearing what you say. While you may think you're only making a suggestion, they hear it as you're telling them what to do. They resent your input as they see themselves as adults able to make their own decisions.

"You have to rephrase what you're saying," says Nancy, "not *I assume everyone's going to be here for Sunday night dinner*, rather *Is everyone going to be home for Sunday dinner because I would like to have a family dinner?*"

Part of the change in communication skills is learning to listen and to not always provide the answer. It's better, says Nancy, to ask them the right questions and let them discover and hear their own answer, rather than giving them the answer. "We still have the urge to fix things for them, but it's better to help them figure out how to fix things themselves."

The best way Nancy finds to communicate with her four kids is to look for reasons to spend time one-on-one with each child. "One of the best ways is driving together in the car. I learn more about what's going on in their life in one twenty-minute drive. You can talk about all kinds of things – how they feel about things, their memories, their dreams."

Learning the Hard Way

Parents have a great urgency to not let kids make the same mistakes they have made. Yet it was learning from those mistakes that have made them better people.

"They have to own their mistakes and also own the responsibility for their mistakes," says Robert. "It's hard because we want to wipe up after them and don't want to see them get hurt – but it's all part of life and growing-up."

"We call this learning the hard way," says Nancy. "When they do something that's not very smart – it's their consequence – you can't take that away from them. You can support and encourage and help them problem-solve, but it's their work."

"It's not easy," adds Robert. "The first tattoo was the hardest. But, you have to learn early to let it go and to trust them. You gave them the skills in the first 18 years of their lives and you have to trust that they will use them. It's their life and they need to figure it out."

Rebel Without a Cause

"The job of the adolescent," says Robert, "is to form an identity separate from parents and we have to allow them to go through this process. In doing so, they will reject values of their parents at some level. It seems that when they are searching for their own identity, anything parents stand for is not part of that identity. But, once they leave home, 90% of the time, they do come back to the values of the parents. Don't read into their behaviour because of the developmental place they're in. This is not where they will always be."

Sitting in the Passenger Seat

It's not easy sitting in the passenger seat with your child at the steering wheel. But there are ways to help them navigate that road. The best thing we can do to guide them at this point, says Robert, is to model. You can't say anything if you don't walk the talk.

Also continue to nurture the relationship. Parents should never forget that they are parents. "No matter how old they get, they still look to you," says Nancy. "If they have a problem, the first people they turn to are their parents. Our son who no longer lives at home had a car accident; the first call he made was to our home."

"You will always be their parent, no matter their age," says Robert. "You need to continue to communicate to them that you care, that they are valuable and that you respect them."

When They Move

When they leave home, it's an entirely different ball game. Everything is new to them and it can be overwhelming. So, while it's important to give them their space, it's as important to keep in touch. With the Internet and long-distance calling packages, it can be relatively easy for parents to maintain communication.

But, make sure your communication doesn't sound like you're checking up on them. "When our kids went away to university, we let them take the lead on being in touch with us," says Nancy. "The only time we would contact them is when we had something happening at home that we needed to share with them."



Try to make questions open-ended, like, *so how's it going?* They can then give as much information as they want without it sounding like twenty questions.

Also, reserve your comments on cooking, clothing and apartment – no matter how sparse the furniture, says Nancy. You may think they need tables, when milk crates are just fine with them.

When They Come Home

According to Statistics Canada, the percentage of young adults in their twenties and early thirties living in the parental home has been increasing. The 2006 census indicated a growing trend to young people returning to their parents' home. About 42% of the 4.1 million young adults age 20 – 29 lived with their parents in 2006, up from 27% in 1981. "And, when they come home again," says Robert, "it's tough, because it's different. Things will not be like they once were. It's difficult to not slip back into the way you treated them when they were kids. But you can't go back. They're past that and you have to move on."

"Our oldest son," says Nancy, "came home from university one weekend and I made some comment about him coming in late. He replied, *Mom, when I'm away at University, you have no idea what I'm doing. Why is it such a big deal when I'm just home for a couple of days?* And he's right; I don't have any idea what's going on when he's away from home. But they have to remember that when they come home, their actions impact other people in the household. When they're back at home, they're under our expectations, they have to be respectful that it's our home, our cars, our stuff; so we had the talk about just being a good guest."

Your Home as Half Full, not Half Empty

While parents may experience the empty nest syndrome and frustration over the lack of control over adult children and their decisions, this new relationship can bring with it many joys and benefits – the first being the joy of a reciprocal relationship. "They're out there learning new skills and have an interesting life to share with us," says Robert. "My wife is a nurse and our daughter has gone to university for nursing. She's now sharing new developments in the field that my wife didn't know."

"Because you've shown concern in caring about their well-being and safety all these years, the tables turn and they become concerned about your well-being and safety," says Nancy. "They become really protective and defensive about you and that's lovely to see."

As young adults they become less dependent on you. They're more inclined to make their own plans and follow through on those plans without relying on Mom or Dad to take them here or there. And with that independence, comes time. It's a great time to take up that hobby or activity you've been putting off for years. "I started my own team room with a partner and do more volunteer work," says Nancy. "It's also a time to strengthen your relationship with your partner. You can go away as a couple on weekends because you trust your kids to make good decisions."



When your adult children go out into the world and start negotiating successes on their own, it's an amazing feeling, says Robert. "We spend a lot of years preparing them for this and it's really wonderful to see how these young adults grow into their own incredible people."