

# Deseret News

## The nest that doesn't empty: Preserving relationships when your kids or your folks move in

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Matt and Milanne Carpenter packed to move out of their BYU housing while their baby, Ayla, slept in August 2012. They moved in with Matt's parents for six months while he finished school, then got their own apartment. (Tom Smart, Deseret News)

As Hurricane Sandy approached, Liz Brock fled her duplex in Seacliff, an area expected to flood, to ride out the storm at her mom and dad's home in Carle Place, N.Y. When her dad offered to let the 27-year-old extend the "visit," though, it made a lot of financial sense.

"We gave her the standard rules from when she was a kid," said Charlie Brock, 68. That meant "no drugs, no parties, try to get along." Another daughter, 21, already lived at home.

It's challenging when the adult "kids" move home or when older children hesitate to leave the nest. Relationships and roles are different than when they were kids; making sure the bonds stay strong in a situation that can fray them isn't necessarily easy or intuitive.

The Census Bureau said the proportion of young adults living with parents increased steadily from 2005 to 2011. That was especially true for men — nearly one in five between the ages of 25 and 34 live at home, compared to 10 percent of women.

A study by the Pew Research Center found those 18 to 24 are more apt to see living with their folks as positive for their relationship than do older children who return home. They are also less likely to say finances drove them home. That's the primary reason those 25-34 move back.

Making it work requires effort on both sides.

In 40 of their 43 years of marriage, the Brocks have had kids around them. "I can't even imagine being an empty nester," Charlie Brock said. He figured he'd be retired by now, but he still works, mostly to keep insurance for his youngest daughter. His wife works, too.

### Adapting

When Matt Carpenter was nearly finished earning his degree at Brigham Young University, he and his wife Milanne and their baby, Ayla, moved in with his parents for about six months. After he graduated, Matt Carpenter, a certified arborist, found work and they moved into their own apartment in Midvale.



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Matt Carpenter sorts through household items, baby Ayla in the foreground. He and his wife, Milanne, moved out of BYU housing as he neared graduation and in with his parents, who helped with child care. He now has a full-time job as a certified arborist and his small family has moved to an apartment in Midvale. (Tom Smart, Deseret News)

They will always be grateful for that temporary haven, said Milanne Carpenter.

"My in-laws are great, so it wasn't too hard," she said. "But there are boundaries and you're sharing stuff and you know it's not your home. You want to feel like an adult, but you're not really living on your own."

Adult children in that situation have to find some balance, to figure out what their responsibilities are and how they can help out, she said. They had a room in the basement and they all shared meals. If she were advising someone else how to do it, she'd recommend everyone "do your best to try to have your own family still and set your own boundaries, too," she added. Togetherness, but not too much.

He now works full-time and she will soon return to BYU for her last semester studying nursing. Her mother-in-law will watch Ayla. Living together temporarily strengthened their bonds.

"It's important to note there's a lot of good news here," said Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, research professor of psychology at Clark University in Worcester, Mass., who has written and polled extensively on the topic. "Parents and kids make the transition more successfully and harmoniously than most people think. It's a pretty consistent

picture that they get along remarkably well overall. There are conflicts, as there are in any human relationships — but it's notable how much better they get along than when the kids were in their adolescence."

Parents joyfully discover adult children are less selfish than they were as teens and more capable of understanding parents' viewpoints. Parents find having adult conversations with kids gratifying and refreshing.



Liz Brock with her dad, Charlie. She moved back in with her folks in Carle Place, N.Y., after Hurricane Sandy forced an evacuation. When the storm was over, she stayed. (Family photo)

Still, some encounter a "collision of habits and preferences," Arnett said. Money tops the list of conflicts. Parents don't want to support adult children but most kids, even those striving very hard, need some help for a while. One of his polls found 40 percent of even those 26 to 29 need at least occasional help. "That shows two things — how tough the economy has been and just how tough it is to make your way to financial independence."



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Besides that, "kids often have very different ideas about what is a good way to spend money. If parents provide it, they understandably want a say in how it's spent. Still, parents really don't begrudge the kids money as long as there's some kind of plan, with a capital P — steps to follow to make your way to adulthood. Some see kids working hard at jobs that don't pay well. 'Look, I can help you out,'" he said. If an adult child "is just drifting and seems depressed or aimless, parents are more reluctant to provide help that doesn't seem to go to any constructive focus."

## Talk it out

"People make a lot of assumptions about how it's going to work, and expectations can lead to a lot of challenges, especially if the children have a different perception of what staying at home is going to be like," said Christina Newberry, Vancouver, Canada, author of "The Hands-On Guide to Surviving Adult Children Living at Home."

"Parents may be focused on trying to get the children out of the house and

the children may not be aware of that. Once you're an adult, the goal is to get out of your parents' home. So the conversation is why you're at home and the steps needed to achieve independence. You should also discuss expectations in terms of how to behave when at home."

Those conversations are easier with a child who left and is back for a time. Newberry recommends a contract discussing how long one can stay, expected behaviors, rent and other issues. "If they've always lived with you and you've provided financial support, it's trickier to explain why things are shifting."



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Families who skip a written agreement may end up changing their minds when a crisis boils up. It's easier and less stressful if some details are hammered out before then, Newberry said.

One of the chief complaints of adult children living at home is a parent's tendency to baby or boss them. Adult kids worry about privacy, loss of independence and having someone looking over their shoulder and telling them what to do. Parents worry about privacy and may feel they're being taken advantage of. There's also a tendency, Newberry said, to worry that they were not successful as parents, proven by the fact an adult child hasn't become independent.

April Masini, who writes books and the advice column Ask April, said her own parents "sometimes, until I got married, treated me like I was 12 and they were in charge of me." That tendency is stronger when adult kids move home, but there's a lot at stake for families in terms of preserving good relationships. "Knowing each others' expectations, whether or not they're in sync, is more than half the battle to compatibility."

When children are young, attention is on them, said Masini, of Naples, Fla. "See what it's like NOT to have dinner on the table when your adult child comes home ... flipping roles is very healthy to gain perspectives and keep things fresh in any relationship."

### Lay it out

Such arrangements work if cards are on the table from the beginning, said Bruce McClary, spokesman for ClearPoint Credit Counseling Solutions Office in Seattle. An adult child needs to be clear about how he or she plans to become independent. Those offering shelter need to be honest about their capacity to help and what they expect in return.

One of the most stressful situations, he said, is the child who never leaves — who may or may not go to college or seek work or plan ahead. "The fault there exists on both sides. You have the parent who may enable by continuing to provide care and a sheltered existence without indication that at some point it's going to evaporate. There may come a point where the lightbulb goes off and an adult child thinks, 'I could milk this for eternity.'"

The timeline should be clear so both know expectations and when the door is going to shut. "It

sounds harsh, but parents can help them find their freedom. Help them make contacts. Talk to them about using this period of time to start saving money for when they are on their own. If you help a child establish a savings account while they are with you, it increases the likelihood they will not come back to you."

Ultimately, the homeowner sets the rules, Masini said. "If you want your child to be independent and productive — and you should — you need to establish boundaries so that moving into the real world will not be too much of a shock."

Establish who will buy food and for whom, chores and more. "Many adult children think they shouldn't have curfews, and that's fine if you agree, but if you don't, it's your house and your rules. ... Establish house rules regarding dating, sex, drinking and other behaviors that you feel are taboo. This isn't up for discussion. Decide the consequences for rules broken before they are broken so everyone is on the same page."

It is also appropriate to expect adult children to pay rent and to cover their own cellphone or other bills, Masini said.

### **Still your kids**

"It's very hard. They are adults and it's hard to say 'you can't do this, you can't do that,' " said Charlie Brock. "I ask, 'Where are you going, what are you doing,' out of fatherly concern. They get annoyed at times. I get annoyed, too. I try to keep my cool."

Liz Brock, a marketing director, sees mutual benefit in the arrangement. She can help her parents, who are getting older, though they don't think they need it yet. She contributes to household expenses while saving over what she'd pay for her own housing.

"It's hard sometimes," she said. "They're pretty lenient when it comes to where I want to go, but they ask a million questions. ... You do laundry and shower at a certain time so you don't get in the way of each other. Dad calls to make sure I'm awake for work. It's cheap rent. But if they want to change the rules, the rules get changed."

When Kenneth and Susan Higgs moved into their house in Midvale, Utah, it was with every intention of having an adult relative live there. Her aunt gave them part of the down payment because there was an attached apartment she could live in and they agreed to care for her.

Since her death, at various times, several of Susan Higgs' children and their families have lived there. How much contact depended on the dynamics of each family. With some, their lives were "quite intertwined," with others not so much. Some visited her house daily or shared some meals. Others treated the arrangement more like a private apartment and space of their own.

Recently, they have rented the apartment to people who are not related to them. But family is very much on scene. Their grandchildren often stay with them on weekends. You can see them sitting on the pew at church with five grandkids under the age of 12.

With time comes experience. She has learned with her children the value of appropriate boundaries. "They are adults. I learned to take my hands off and look at them like adults. I feel bad when things are bad for them. When I hear something sad or that they've been hurt in some manner, it hurts me. But I don't interfere."

When she tries to summarize what it's like to have adult children and their children come home, she offers this advice: "I would probably say that being very forgiving of each other is a big aspect of it."

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