



When Your Adult Child Moves Back Home



Last summer, my adult son called and asked if it was okay for him to move back home. Initially, I thought I had a bad phone connection. I repeated what I thought I heard him say. “So, you plan on moving back home?” “Yes,” he responded. Mind you, he had been independent for the past 10 years and I was an empty nester. I had anticipated that it could happen, but I wasn’t prepared. This COVID pandemic, unemployment, and rising student debt has thrown a curve ball at many families who were not prepared for junior to return home.

When adult children move back home, it can be confusing and overwhelming for everyone involved. Parents who plan ahead and open the lines of communication make the best of this sometimes-awkward situation. It’s important to communicate before they move in.

What’s the golden rule of living with an adult child in the home? Clarify your expectations. This requires honest communication. Represent yourself honestly and openly as a parent. Do you expect your child to do housework, contribute to groceries and bills, and pay rent while he stays with you? How long are you willing to let him live in your home? Will he have access to your car? And what do you need to see him do in terms of job hunting, if he’s unemployed? Really think through what you want and what you’re willing to put up with, and then talk it through. If your child is to have the gift of living back home, so to speak, he also has a responsibility in the areas of courtesy, housework and possibly finances. Those are things that need to be discussed openly and honestly with your child.

Here are some rules that can guide you through this time with your adult child.

1. Before your child moves back in: One of the most important things parents can do when faced with adult children moving back in is to make a plan before the move happens, says Empowering Parents. Sit down with your child and discuss every aspect of what it means for him to live with you. In his book, “The Total Transformation,” James Lehman talks about the four questions you should ask your child when you are anticipating some kind of change. The questions to ask (with some examples of answers you might give) are:

How will we know this is working?

“We’ll know because everyone will be doing their fair share. We’ll be respectful of each other.”

How will we know it isn’t working?

“We’ll know if someone isn’t pulling their weight or starts overstepping boundaries.”

What will we do if it’s not working?

“You will make plans to leave within a month.”

What will we do if it is working?

“We’ll continue with our original plan of six months.”

2. Set limits: Be sure to set time limits and parameters on your adult child’s stay. These can be readdressed or changed around; there can be some flexibility but be clear about the plan. And that plan might be, “You’ll stay until you get a job,” or “You’re going to stay until you get your first paycheck.” If your child is going to stay until he makes a certain amount of money, be clear and in agreement about that.

Basically, what you’re helping to do is create motivation. If there’s no guide and no set time limit, there’s no motivation. You might say, “What we expect is that after six months, you’re going to have your own place.” You’re not telling them what to do; you’re making clear what you’re going to live with.

3. Don’t get pulled into guilt: If you’ve always done everything for your child and now you’re asking him to be responsible and contribute to the household, understand that you are changing a system. You will likely get resistance and what’s called “pushback.” Your child might get very angry and say things like, “I can’t believe my own parents are doing this to me!” Don’t get pulled back in and start to feel guilty. As long as you’ve thought it through and considered your own needs and principles, you’ll be able to hold onto yourself through that anger as you insist that your child gets on his own feet.

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4. Be mindful of resentments. Anytime you start to feel resentment, you have a responsibility to ask yourself, “How am I not addressing this issue and how am I stepping over my own boundaries here?” In honoring your relationships, you want to make sure that you take responsibility for what you are asking for and what you need. Otherwise you’re going to be saying “yes” to something you really want to be saying “no” to—and that’s not good for any relationship.

5. Adjust your attitude. “You didn’t fail as a parent, and your kids didn’t fail, either,” says Susan Newman, social psychologist and author of “Under One Roof Again: All Grown Up and (Re) Learning to Live Happily Together.” “Some of your friends may actually be jealous” about the time you’re spending with your adult children.

6. Maintain your schedule. “Don’t give up your social life to accommodate an adult child,” Newman warns. You don’t have to rush home at 6 p.m. to cook for them, for instance.

7. Enjoy future insurance. “The silver lining? Down the road, adult children are more likely to care for parents who helped them during tough times.”

8. Enforce the exit. “If after 2 years your adult child is showing no progress,” Newman says, “it’s OK to nudge them” out of the nest once again.

A Final Word

If your adult child is living with you or planning to move home, it might not necessarily be a bad thing. For some families, it can be a time where the relationship grows and deepens between parent and child, because you’re getting some extra time with your kids. You might be able to work out some of the difficulties that have plagued your relationships for years. So, it’s not always a bad thing for adult kids to live at home. I believe the key is for everybody to understand expectations and try to work together in a cooperative, collaborative way. Be cognizant of what’s realistic on both ends. Remember, you’re not there to indulge your adult children and over-function for them. Rather, you’re helping them move towards independence and maturity. And even if there are difficulties, there is still an opportunity for the relationship to grow.

References:

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Susan Newman, PhD, a social psychologist and author of the book “Under One Roof Again: All Grown Up and (Re) Learning to Live Happily Together”

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