

# When an Adult Child Moves Back Home

More than 40 per cent young adults between the ages of 20 and 29 live in the parental home, according to Statistics Canada's 2011 Census of Population – and this census data doesn't even take into account how many people have been displaced or called home due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Being put on leave, temporarily or permanently laid off, or having to move back in to care for an aging or sick parent have become commonplace, which means many adult children are moving back in with their parents. Some of these adult children have never left home, while others have returned after going away to school, serving in the military, or going through the breakdown of a relationship. Many are dealing with financial pressures caused by a tough housing market, the loss of a job, or an inability to find work.

As a parent, you may have mixed emotions about living with an adult child. You may welcome the chance to live with your child, but you may also feel uncertain about how well you will get along at this stage of life. You may also have safety concerns now that the number of people in your house has increased. Making your expectations clear can help you develop a new and rewarding relationship with your child while you continue to enjoy your own independence and relationships.

## Facing the "refilled" or "open" nest

These days it is common for young adults to return home to live in what's sometimes called a "refilled" or "open" nest. Your child may return home because they have faced a crisis such as the loss of a job, an unexpected pregnancy, or a marital separation. They may want to save money to further their education, rent an apartment, or buy a house. Or they might be in a position where financially, they cannot be independent financially. Your child may want to live with you, even if they don't need to, simply because they're worried about family members during the COVID-19 pandemic. In any case, you'll probably have some adjustments to make:

**Your relationship with your child will change.** For the first time, you may have an opportunity to see your child as a mature adult and friend. But you may also have to speak up about your own need for privacy, help with chores, and bill-paying.

**Your family life will change.** If you still have other children at home, they may feel upstaged by the sudden reappearance of a sibling—you will all face adjustments. Family routines and schedules will be affected by an adult child moving back home.

**You may have more demands on your time.** If your child has returned home because of a layoff or marital crisis, you may find that—even though your child is an adult— they still needs you or your spouse to be available to boost their morale or help them think through their future. This may come at a time when you are busy working, doing volunteer activities, or caring for an older relative.

## Rewriting the ground rules

When an adult child returns home, everyone may slip into old habits and ways of relating. Differences in each person's expectations can lead to conflicts—for example, if your child still expects you to buy the groceries and prepare dinner each evening, but you are feeling that you can't afford the extra expense or that you should not have to take on the extra work. You can avoid misunderstandings if you make your expectations clear at the outset:

**Be clear about the house rules.** Don't assume that your child knows the rules just because they are an adult. It is easy to fall back into old routines and roles. It's especially important to be clear about what social distancing rules you'll be following—will your child be able to have friends over? Will they be

expected to wash their hands immediately upon coming home? If there are guidelines you would like for everyone to follow, make it clear what they are.

**Hold a family meeting.** As a first step, ask everyone who will be at the meeting (your spouse, other children at home, your adult child moving back in) to think about their needs and expectations ahead of time so that they can understand and discuss them. Then discuss everyone's needs at the meeting. Make sure everyone understands each other's expectations about social distancing, chores, privacy, schedules, entertaining, transportation, babysitting for grandchildren, etc.

**Treat a returning child as a responsible adult.** Your child may want to contribute to the household either financially or by helping with chores, or both. If they don't suggest this, it's important for you to encourage and allow them to contribute both financially and with daily chores. This will ease your burden and bolster your child's sense of responsibility and independence.

**Talk about finances.** Even if your child pays rent, you may need to discuss other expenses. Have a clear understanding of who will pay the phone bill, who will pay the car and health insurance, and whether you would like your child to contribute to food and other expenses. If your child is unemployed and can contribute little or nothing to the household expenses, you may need to set limits on some expenses. Review your budget and talk with your child about what you can reasonably pay for food, the phone bill, and other necessities, and let your child know about any budget constraints.

**Make clear that the situation is temporary.** Talk about how long your child will live with you. Some experts suggest that you agree up front to re-evaluate the situation after a set period of time, such as three months. This might not be possible if you're not sure about what the future brings—when a case of COVID-19 will clear up, when your child will be able to get a new job, when a new place to live might become available. Instead, you might talk about your expectations for what your child will do to move forward while at home. Will your child make a serious effort to look for work or apply to programs that could provide further education or training? If so, what do you consider a "serious effort"?

**Be sure that you all have the same expectations and understanding of your child's goals and plans.** If your child is having trouble finding work, you can help by recommending career coaching or personal counselling, suggesting helpful online tools or websites for career development, offering to help with the job search, or just being there to talk.

**Recognize that adult children may feel depressed about having to move back in with their parents.** Often the events that cause a child to return home are not what your child would have liked. They may feel like a failure or embarrassed. Be there for your child as much as possible, letting them know of times when you needed the help of your parents or a friend. However, if your child has symptoms of depression that last for a long period of time, help them get professional help. Depression can limit their ability to find a job, save money, and resume living on their own.

**Discuss problems as they occur.** Things may crop up that cause you, your child, or other family members discomfort and disagreements. When this happens, it is best to talk about the issues as they occur so that resentment does not build. Your child is now an adult and they should be treated with the same respect that you would show a friend who was staying with you. Your child should, in turn, treat you respectfully, even when there are disagreements that need to be talked through. If anyone in the family is having difficulty living by the ground rules that were established up front, you may want to write those rules down as a reminder. Your adult child needs to remember that it is your house—they are living there as a means to assist them through a period of time.

## Looking toward the future

When a child returns home, you may feel that you've taken a temporary step backward. Just when you and your spouse were looking forward to having your home to yourselves, there is the presence of a child to worry about again. It will be easier to adjust if you do the following:

**Remember that it's natural to want your child to move out someday.** Expecting your adult child to leave home isn't selfish—it's a recognition that your child should want to take on the full range of adult responsibilities, and that the world that they "leave the nest" to go into will be accommodating of their need to work and a safe place to live. Making the transition to independent living is a normal developmental milestone and an expectation you should set for your child. Even if you'd be happy to have your child stay forever, some young adults get "cabin fever" at their parents' homes and need to move out to expand their horizons.

**Look for the advantages in your situation.** With another adult at home to help feed the dog or water the lawn, you might be able to go away for a long weekend or put together that scrapbook you've been promising your grandchildren you would make.

**Don't lose sight of the future.** If you've been planning things you wanted to do after your children left home, keep your goals in mind. Your adult child moving back home shouldn't keep you and your spouse from planning a trip or from continuing with routines you've established while your child has been away.

**Continue doing the things that are important to you.** While your adult child is living at your home again, they shouldn't require the same oversight that they did as an adolescent, especially if you've communicated the ground rules. Visiting friends, taking a course, going out for the evening or away for a long weekend are all still possible while your child is living at home (provided they're following social distancing guidelines). Spending some time away from each other will help the temporary living arrangement work better.

If you follow some of these suggestions, the time that your child spends living with you again can be rewarding for you both. It can be a time that offers the comfort, love, and security of family. It is a time that makes clear to all of you that it is OK to ask family for help. Being there for each other is truly what family is all about.

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