Boomerang Kids: Strategies for the Not-So-Empty Nest

Many of us are familiar with the term “empty nest,” used to describe the home after children have left. What is, however, becoming equally familiar to many families today is the not-so-empty nest, reflecting the return of grown children back to the home. These are “Boomerang Kids” -- adult children who return home to live with their parents following a period of independence.

Researchers at Healthy Workplaces (HW) have been examining this phenomenon. What we have determined is that while the re-formed family may actually be more successful than recent reports in the media depict, this reconstituted family environment can be extremely stressful for parents and their adult children. This can be particularly true if this living arrangement is not approached with planning, foresight, and a full appreciation for the consequences of this decision for all who are involved.

Our staff became interested in this trend when results of a recent HW survey revealed that 9% of all respondents reported having an adult child living at home. This reflects the results of the 2000 U.S. census, which showed that 4 million people (10%) between the ages of 25 and 34 currently live with their parents; this is double the percentage of that age group who lived with their parents 50 years ago.

Internet job search services Jobtrak and Monstertrak both report that 60% of graduating college seniors anticipate returning home to live with their parents and 21% intend to stay for more than a year. These statistics reflect recent declines in the job market coupled with rising student debt: 32% of college students now have more than 4 credit cards, and they graduate owing more than $7000 in credit card debt and an additional $20,000 or more in student loans.

Adult children return home to live with their parents for a number of reasons. These include divorce or marital separation, layoffs, or difficulty finding a job upon graduation from college. Alcohol and other drug abuse problems can also be a factor in the decision to return home. This can often create a crisis situation requiring an immediate intervention.

Young people today are also delaying many of the steps that we typically associate with adulthood. The average age of marriage is now 26; this is 4 years later than it was in 1970, and child bearing is being postponed until couples are well into their thirties. We are also seeing heightened expectations for young adults regarding their lifestyle and purchasing patterns, and these things seem to become more important than achieving actual independence from their parents’ homes. Changes such as these represent what many have described as an extended
period of adolescence, during which it becomes common and expected for young adults to continue to live with their parents. Newsweek magazine coined the term “adultolescence” to describe this stage of life. What may be occurring is a considerable change in the path young people typically follow from parental dependence to full independence.

Accompanying these life changes are other societal trends that suggest that adult “returnees” and the refilled nest represent other dynamics. There is a closer relationship between generations than has been true in a number of years. Indeed some evidence that suggests that in these uncertain, post-9/11 times young adults have expressed more of a desire to stay closer to home and family, those things emotionally closest to them. Returning home provides young adults with a valuable safety net, particularly in times of ambiguity and transition.

The implications of this phenomenon are varied. New standards in economics and education may theoretically prepare us for returning children, but even if parents acknowledge changing conditions in society, they still may not expect their kids to return home. Research conducted over the past three years shows that after leaving home, half of young adults return within 30 months, often bringing a spouse or child of their own with them.

During economic downturns families are already faced with significant demands; the now-cluttered nest may heighten the family stress level even further. This can and does often spill over into the workplace impacting colleagues and productivity. There can also be a residual effect on parental retirement plans. Imagine the tension between once-again supporting parents, and co-resident young adults with significant amounts of discretionary income. On the other hand, some boomerang kids feel like failures because reaching their “grown-up” goals has been delayed. According to one sociologist, this is “a generation on hold.” Parents want to help, and try to successfully balance their desire to build self-sufficiency and independence in their children while providing support.

Many children and parents who are living together again do make the best of the situation and are finding that it can be a positive experience. However, there must be ground rules and support mechanisms identified up front.

- Long and short term goals for the young adult need to be defined.
- Boomerang kids should pay rent or contribute to the household in a very real, tangible way. This can be both financially and by taking on household chores and responsibilities.
- Place a limit on the amount of time back home, and couple that with healthy,
positive encouragement to move along with life.

- Outline the “House Rules”; remember that everyone abides by them.

- Parents must respect the adult child’s right to make decisions about how they live their own lives, and how they raise their own children, even under the same roof.

- There needs to be an understanding that the return is temporary and a one-time event. Statistically speaking very few kids keep boomeranging; those who do find that relations with parents worsen each time.

- The return to home is a valuable safety net for boomerang kids during a time of transition. Whether due to divorce or education or employment, this transition is a reasonable event that parents can support. Parents almost always want to "help out" when they see a clear-cut need.

- It’s important that the boomerang kid is cheerful, good company, and gets along with Mom. Interestingly enough, getting along well with Dad doesn't seem to be as important!

- Both parents and young adults need a supportive work environment with systems in place for addressing issues of stress, anxiety, spillover, and confusion.

- It is all right to ask for help in order to make things work. Open and honest communication goes a long way to solving many problems.

The benefits of the boomerang situation - mutual support, pooling of resources, and shared household tasks - may significantly offset the negative impact of the unexpected in parents' lives. Research has shown that co-residence is, overall, a positive experience from the point of view of both the older and the younger generation.

The popular image in the media is that of a self-centered young adult returning to the home and placing an unfair economic burden on parents who resent the intrusion. While that may describe the experience for some, boomerang kids are, for the most part, well tolerated by parents as long as the return is temporary and doesn't occur too many times. The re-formed family may actually be happier than anyone expects. With planning, foresight, respect, and appreciation for each other, the re-filled nest can work.

**Healthy Workplaces** provides coaching, planning, consultation, and facilitation for individual and organizational development. For more information please contact Mallary Tytel, President, at mtytel@healthyworkplaces.com.