

Parents can only light the way for grown children on odyssey

By SUSAN REIMER

After social scientist William Galston presented his report on what our twentysomething children are up to these days, he was swamped with e-mails, phone calls and dinner-party button-holing by panicked parents. "It appears we have an entire generation of parents who are asking themselves what they are supposed to be doing now," said Galston, a scholar at the Brookings Institution and himself the father of a twenty-something son.

Last month, Galston described this new developmental stage between adolescence and adulthood in a presentation sponsored by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy - which has expanded its provinces to include a new decade of driftiness and uncertainty that appears to follow the teen years.

David Brooks of The New York Times deemed it "the odyssey" in a column and it was among the most e-mailed items on the Times Web site for days.

Clearly, a nerve had been struck.

Galston's description of unsettled young people, jumping from job to school, travel and work, home with Mom and Dad or living with friends, is a shock for parents who thought their job would be done when the last kid hit 21 or graduated from college. Galston says that parents, who found the teen years trying but familiar, are completely confused about what their role should be with children who are taking five, six, seven years or longer to transition from student life to adult life.

"I have a feeling that a whole lot of parents are, on the one hand, perplexed and worried by the postponement of commitment and the disruption of patterns and sequences of adult life that they recognize," says Galston. "But on the other hand, they realize it would not be very productive to try to intervene in their young adult children's lives right now. We are not likely to create an outcome we want. A whole bunch of us who adopted a much less authoritative parenting style may find it all comes out in the wash now."

So what is our relationship with our twenty-somethings supposed to look like - aside from the check-writing? One of the hallmarks of our children's untethered lives is that they miss a lot of pay-days. Even those who commit to work and a career will take longer to achieve any kind of financial independence in this time of wage stagnation. That means parents are on the hook for everything from cell-phone bills and auto insurance to rent and health insurance.

We are not talking about a check in a birthday card. We are supporting our twenty-somethings to the tune of thousands of dollars a year. We can afford it because we have fewer kids than our own parents did, and Mom and Dad both work. And we don't seem to mind because our children are much more pleasant than we were with our parents at this age, and we are more in touch with them than we were with our own parents.

Technology such as cell phones and e-mail make that easier, Galston says, but a decline in conflict over newspaper headlines is the real reason parents and their adult children get along - we agree, or nearly agree, on a lot of topics.

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"The upside of all of this is that our children are more emotionally available to us in ways that we didn't feel safe being emotionally available to our parents," Galston says.

At the same time, we will not be able to exercise any direct authority over these children. Most of us never did much of that anyway, Galston agrees, and it is too late to start now. "The key might be for parents to be available for those moments that are utterly unpredictable and unscriptable when a young adult might seek advice," he says.

Sarah Brown, executive director of the National Campaign and the mother of three twenty-something daughters, worries that this new relationship between parents and their older children is seen as somehow inappropriate. She talks about the popular criticism of "helicopter parents" who hover and "lawnmower parents" who smooth the way for their children.

"Parents and children who talk to each other every day or so - is there something wrong with that?" she asks. "For hundreds of thousands of years, our species evolved with everyone in touch with everyone else all the time. We lived in close-knit, multigenerational groups."

This all changed after World War II, with the great dispersal to the new suburbs. Mobility meant separation, and that wasn't necessarily a good thing for families. "Evolutionary biology has a lot to

teach us. I mean, for millions of years we all lived in the same cave, for heaven's sake. I think we need to celebrate the closeness of children and their parents, whatever the reasons."

Just as we did during their teen years, parents of twenty-something children can play a critical role as a sounding board - a perspective different from peers and popular culture. But this is delicate business. It involves a renegotiation of a relationship that is no longer top-down. We are not quite equals, but we are not grossly unequal.

"Our children are still trying to figure out money, careers and relationships," said Brown. "We can provide a long-term perspective on these things that their friends can not. The difference is, we are no longer in charge and giving orders. We are talking things over."

Ultimately, parents must make it clear to their children that they are willing to be, as Galston puts it, "a haven from a heartless world for a little while, but not a way of life."

We must continue to be what we have been since our children were babies - a bridge to independence.