

When Your Child Is Not a Child

6/16/2020

Welcome back! We hope last week's blog was helpful and gave you some action steps that you and your family can take. This week we're talking about something that's been coming up for several of the families that Sarah and I work with- young adult children who unexpectedly had to come back home because of COVID-19. Most of them returned home from college after their dorms closed. Some returned home to save money while they looked for work or worked from home. While many parents are happy to have their kids at home, it hasn't been all smooth sailing. We've heard from parents *and* their young adult kids about the difficulties they've been having with this situation.

From the parents' perspective, we've heard things like, "I'm just trying to help," "I don't know why they're not more motivated," and "Why aren't they doing what I say?"

From the young adults' perspective, we've heard things like, "I know what I'm doing," "They never listen to me," and "Why are they telling me what to do?"

Back in August or September, you were expecting your young adult to be away at school and only home for breaks and random weekends. Even if they were living with you and commuting to school, they still spent the majority of their day away from you and may even have spent nights on campus with friends. For some of you, your high school graduates may have moved out on their own to work. Or maybe you have college grads who moved out of town or even out of state to pursue a job or graduate program. In any case, you and your young adult were both adjusting to their newfound freedom- they were on their own and setting their own course. They may have called you for advice (or you may have called them to give it ☺), but mostly they were learning how to be on their own.

Then COVID-19 hit and your young adult is back at home along with the rest of the family. Everyone is faced with uncertainty about whether/when they will return to school or work and you have a young adult back under your roof when you least expected it.

So, how are you handling it? If you're like the parents Sarah and I work with, you've had at least a few moments of friction.



It can be hard to balance your parenting instincts with your young adult's need to be independent and make their own decisions. One reason for these struggles is the fact that most of your young adult's growing and maturing is now being done out of your sight. Throughout childhood and adolescence, you observed small, gradual changes in your child as they got older, so you had time to get used to it. But, once they left your home, they continued growing and changing- you just weren't there to see it happen. When they come back home, it can be hard to reconcile the new, more adult version of your child with the child who last lived in your home. Even if they've only been gone for a few months, the changes can take some getting used to.

The biggest point sticking point that comes up is likely your young adult feeling like you are "bossing them around." Well, the last time they lived with you full time you *were* the boss- you made the rules and they had to answer to you. But they've gotten used to being on their own and making decisions for themselves. They've been coming and going as they please, creating their own schedules, and not asking permission to do things. Now, they're unexpectedly back at home and it's so easy for you to fall back into your old parent-child dynamics.

So, what do you do? It's important to remember that *your* child is not *a* child anymore. While they may not be ready to be completely independent, they are making their own decisions (and facing the consequences of those decisions). It is critical that this continue. Yes, they've come up with some routines and habits that may be different from what you taught them. They may do things differently than you think they should be done. That doesn't mean their way is the wrong way to do things.

One approach you and your young adult child may take is to act like they're still away. It's not that they can treat your home like a hotel- you still set general house rules and expectations for how family members participate in taking care of your home and each other. For instance, everyone may be responsible for keeping the common areas neat and keeping their bedrooms free of food trash, etc., but you don't get to decide on the level of neatness of your young adult's bedroom. Decide on household responsibilities, like who does the young adult's laundry, meal planning, chipping in with household expenses, things like that. It's also okay to ask young adults to help out with younger siblings, but keep in mind that they still have their own stuff going on in their lives- school, work, other responsibilities. So, they're not always going to be able to drop everything to help out. Remember, they're not even supposed to be at home right now, so consider what you would do if they weren't home.

COVID-19 throws a wrench into things because you may still be limiting how much interaction with the outside world your family is having. You still get to set the rules about how you're managing COVID-19-related safety and health concerns during this time. It's reasonable that anyone staying in your home follow the safety rules. However, it's okay to listen to your young adult's opinions on this matter. Also, if they are working or have reasons to interact with people outside the home, have a conversation about your comfort level with health and safety behaviors when they're not at home. However, it's important to frame this in terms of your concern about the health and safety of everyone in the house, not as a parent telling a child what to do.

Overall, it's important to give your young adult the leeway to make decisions about how they spend their time, the schedule they set, and the other daily decisions they were making when they weren't living at home. You can give some input if you see them veering *way* off path (sleeping all day, blowing off assignments, missing work), but otherwise give them enough room to make their own choices and experience the consequences of those decisions.



Being a good parent requires
knowing when to push & when to
back off when to help & when to
let them make mistakes & then
being strong enough to watch
them go.

One thing that often comes up is the tension created when you are paying for your child's education and you see them showing less dedication to their schoolwork than you would like. Here's the thing- while they were away at school, did you see them sleeping late or procrastinating? Did you call them every day to make sure they did their homework? I'm guessing not. They developed their own habits while they were away. If their grades were reasonable and they were making progress in their education, do they have to go about it the way you think they should? Resist the urge to micromanage. Your young adult needs support, not management.

As stressful as having your young adult home for the foreseeable future can be, this is a great time to get to know your child as the young adult they are becoming. As such, it's important to avoid treating them like the child they used to be. Remember, your child has to respect you and your home regardless of how old they are, but they're right- you're *not* the boss of them anymore. It can be a tough pill to swallow, but giving your young adult enough room to still be independent will benefit your relationship and your young adult's development in the long run.