

Try to Act Your Age

We had an interesting discussion with one of our elders after church on Sunday. We're all concerned about understanding and strengthening the relationship between parents and their young adult children, particularly those still at home. Melanie and I were talking about it later with one of our own, and we had an insight—we need to be encouraging our kids to act their age.

Of course that usually means “Grow up!” as in, stop whining, take responsibility, deal with your disappointments, and so on. It means, like Paul said, it's time to put away childish things and commit to think, speak, and act, like an adult. (1 Corinthians 13:11)

But our son observed that many of his friends were struggling with some of their parents' long-standing advice. “We're regulating ourselves beyond what's really intended or necessary,” he said.

As young adults, they are finding it hard to step out of boundaries that their parents laid out many years before—to a young teenager, not someone in their mid-20s.

That's the crux of the problem in some families. When our sons and daughters are younger, we put restrictions on their freedom to come and go, on their choices of friends and entertainment, and on their self-expression and romantic inclinations. With good reason—there are traps and life-changing consequences in areas that are unfamiliar to them. We don't want them to get hurt, or to hurt other people, so we establish boundaries to keep them away from trouble and temptation while they are growing up.

But now that they're finished with their basic education and are mostly matured into responsible young men and women, many of those areas are open for them to explore. We put fences

around our 14-year-olds to keep them from acting like they were 24. We work hard to develop strong character in them and teach to them discern good and bad, right and wrong, and to make prudent decisions with the information they can find. It takes time and intentional action for both parents and progeny; that's what parenting and growing up are all about.

But guess what? There is a problem if our 24-year-olds are still acting like they are 14—dependent, purposeless, irresponsible. And that problem, the “endless adolescence” which seems to be rising all around us, is inappropriate and harmful, too.

You might have a mental picture of the deadbeat in the basement, adrift, with more ideas about comic books and video games than about college, career, and starting a family. More often, we find, it looks very different.

Often it's showing up as young men (and young women) who are *afraid* to work up their own opinions and plans about life. They are indecisive and insecure because we parents may not have let them take reasonable risks and make decisions—and work out the consequences—before they reached the years of adult stature.

There are good reasons your adult children might be living at home. More than half of recent college graduates are unemployed or working in lower-skill jobs than their degrees qualified them to do. Delays in career prospects tend to delay marriage prospects as well. If they're back home, it may not be for failure of vision or lack of trying.

But we need to remember that even if our young adults are back in the bedroom they left for college five years ago, they are not the teenagers you packed into the freshman dorms ... and they're definitely not the budding adolescents you were raising five years before that.

Our own children have never made an outright rebellion against

our “house rules”—some respectful discussion from time to time, but not insurrection. But have we considered when they need to be released from those rules?

“Many of my friends were simply told, ‘No, don’t do that,’ when they were 12 or 13,” our son said. “It would have been helpful if they were told, ‘No, you can’t do that *now*, but there will be a time for it later.’”

In other words, when the rules are put in place to keep your 14-year-old from thinking he’s 24, have you considered what you’re going to do to keep your 24-year-old from thinking he’s still 14?

Each way, they need to learn to act their age, and we parents need to be, well, *parenting*, to show them how to do it—and then give them the freedom to carry it out.

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