

PARENTING

Helping adult children face the recession

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A parent's job is never done — an axiom that has proven to be particularly true in a deepening recession.

As adult children graduate and flood the job market, more and more moms and dads are discovering that snipping the financial umbilical cord will take more than a quick surgical cut. Their

offspring's dreams of employment are colliding with the reality of hard times.

But the dismal economy is not the only obstacle in the slow lane to adulthood. Today's 20-somethings, experts say, are more likely to be burdened by debt — both student loans and credit card — and higher living

• **TURN TO RECESSION, 4E**
expenses than the generations before them. In the past 20 years the cost of a four-year college degree has more than doubled, while housing prices have tripled in some areas. Salaries, on the other hand, have not kept pace.

"It's just harder for them to find jobs now," says Ellen Gibran-Hesse, author of *Failure to Launch: How to Get Your Teens and Young Adults to Independence* (\$24.95, kidsoutnow.com). "And when they do, they're discovering that their salary may not be enough to pay the bills."

Survey after survey confirms what most of us already know anecdotally: Kids may have a college degree (or two) but many parents are still footing some of their bills. Forty-four percent of newsletter subscribers to VibrantNation.com, a website for women 50 and older, said they were helping out their adult children or grand-

children, mostly with their mortgage or rent.

This mirrors a 2005 Pew Research study that found four in 10 adults age 60 or older were giving money to their adult children, while only 12 percent were getting financial help from their kids.

That generosity has its downside, however. Thirty-five percent of the women in the VibrantNation.com survey said they were using funds that they normally would have set aside for retirement — a transfer of wealth that financial planners consider a no-no.

"The women in these demographics are already assuming they're going to be working longer" because of their own dwindling retirement fund and the help they're providing their kids, says VibrantNation CEO Stephen Reily. "Conversations on the site show them sharing tips about how to handle this. There's a lot of exchange and support."

CASES ON POINT

Ana and Camilo Lopez are helping son, Camilo Jr., through a tough employment patch. Since his graduation from Florida International University with an international business and finance degree two years ago, Camilo Jr. has gone — as his mother puts it — "from one loser job to another." He finally found a manager's position with AT&T — then was laid off.

Camilo Jr. lives at home and earns money by buying automobiles at auction, fixing them and reselling them — enough to pay some of his bills but not to go out on his own. He's also studying for

entrance exams to law school. Lopez says she and her husband walk a fine line between helping and enabling both their sons. Their younger son is a college sophomore.

"I'm patient and supportive as long I see them doing what they're supposed to be doing and heading for a goal," she says. "I also tell them that nowadays a simple B.A is a dime a dozen. They've got to go to graduate school."

But graduate school doesn't always pay off these days. Amanda Stein, 23, started hunting for a job even before she got a master's in elementary education with honors from the University of Florida last August. So far, however, she's only had substitute teacher jobs.

The money she earns pays for gas and extras, but she can't afford to move out. "I spend a lot of time sending my resume around, but it's the same answer everywhere," says Amanda. "They have to place the teachers they've surplus from other schools first."

Mom Joani Stein, a first grade teacher at Devonaire K-8 in West Kendall, says she's confident Amanda will eventually land a job. "She didn't graduate at a good time, but I know she's doing her very best."

While experts agree that it's important for adult children to get guidance, monetary and otherwise, as they navigate their way to independence, parents must not lose sight of their ultimate goal: making their 20-somethings into responsible adults who can stand alone.



TIPS AND PITFALLS

Here are some tips about what to do and what pitfalls to avoid:

- Offer encouragement in job hunting — it's free. From Randy Loren, a financial advisor and author of *Climbing the Money Mountain: The Young Adult's Guide to Reaching Your Financial Peak* (\$19.95, Financial Nation Publications): "Remind them that persistence and resiliency in the face of obstacles are priceless job skills." What's more, remind them that there have been many recessions before, and all of them have had an end.

- Don't rescue. Insist that your young adult face — and resolve — challenges on her own. In other words, don't write the cover letter to her resume, but do provide suggestions on how to improve it. "Need creates ambition," says Gibran-Hesse.

- Enlist family, friends and business associates. Pam Rodriguez of Miami, for instance, used the network she has developed as a manager/owner of a hotel management investment fund to help daughter Carolina, a college sophomore, land a coveted summer internship in her field of study, environmental science. And when son Carlitos, a recent Duke University graduate, went for interviews, she and her husband took him through a mock interview session. He landed a job as a financial analyst.

"There has to be a balance, though," Rodriguez says. "You can use your network and contacts, but they should do the phone calls and e-mails. It's their responsibility to pursue the leads."

- Come up with a plan. This isn't YOUR plan, however. Your son or daughter

should be the one writing down short and long-term goals, geographical preferences for jobs and a reasonable budget. Your role? Offer suggestions.

- Help create a timetable for the plan — and for financial independence. Don't let the invitation to come back home be open-ended. Set a deadline for your child to move out as well as a date when the cash infusions will end.

- Assure him there's nothing wrong with taking a temp job or even doing part-time or unpaid volunteer work if it will build skills and enhance his professional network. While no substitute for a real job, these options encourage a young adult to be active, not passive.

- If you're subsidizing the rent, tell her she must look for options: a roommate to help with the housing costs, relocating to cheaper housing, cost-cutting in non-essential activities such as entertainment and eating out.

- Charge your child rent, however token the amount might be, if he's living at home and has a job. That teaches responsibility. "If that feels uncomfortable," says Loren, "require labor in exchange for rent. For example, they have to do the shopping, cook one meal a week, or mow the lawn."

- Set rules of behavior. From Loren: "Your child is an adult. That means they have to respect your lifestyle and treat you like a landlord. Set up some guidelines so there will not be misunderstandings." This can include a variety of topics, from entertaining friends of the opposite sex to communication about his whereabouts.

- Recognize that your child, even if she's still financially dependent, is an adult. Reduce the number and kind

of limits, and increase the freedom. Don't talk at or nag your child — they shut down — but don't be afraid to use "tough love."

"The style of talking that is best is direct, straight and clear," notes Susan Kuczmar-ski, author of *The Sacred Flight of the Teenager: A Parent's Guide to Stepping Back and Letting Go* (\$12.95, Book-ends Publishing). "Don't give unsolicited advice to your adult children — ever — unless he or she asks for it."

- Don't give up your couples time with your mate or your own interests when your child returns home. And stay positive.

"Don't worry, they'll find their way," says Gibran-Hesse. "The important thing is that they're moving forward, even if it's in small steps. Parents have to recognize that this is a process and that a parent should be a guiding, calm presence during the whole journey."

The kids may have earned a college degree — or two — but many parents are still footing some of their bills.



PATRICK FARRELL/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

HARD LESSONS: Joani Stein looks over the resume of daughter Amanda, who got a master's in elementary education with honors from the University of Florida last year, but so far has had only substitute teacher jobs.



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