

The Long Goodbye

How does it feel to be the object of so much love and attention, so much anxiety and aspiration? Suffocating, yes, but also safe. An essay on boomer parenting, from the kids' perspective.

You've been busy this past decade. It started the summer before you entered high school in Fresno, Calif. You, like most of your friends, decided to give up your freedom— sleeping in, afternoon bike rides, late nights of Nintendo—for two months of classes. Summer school. It wasn't that you were failing; oh no, your guidance counselor encouraged you to enroll to stay ahead. That's been the goal (hasn't it?) since then. Advanced Placement classes, volunteering, SAT prep, late nights at the college newspaper, study abroad, five internships and now you have this, a great job in a big city, New York. But what's next? You're turning 24 this week, grown up and still a little amazed at all the hurdles you jumped to get here. But in the back of your mind, there's doubt—lingering, asking ... where did it go, the so-called carefree, exploratory days of your youth?

This new generation of twentysomethings, the offspring of the baby boomers, is the most talented, competitive (and compulsive) group this country has seen. A record 84 percent of adults now hold a high-school diploma, compared with 63 percent in 1975, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The average starting salary for college graduates in lucrative professions (like engineering and consulting) hovers in the \$50,000 range. It's no surprise. You and your friends—and your friends' friends—have been balancing commitments like spinning plates in a circus act. "It's a Renaissance generation," says David Morrison, president of Twentysomething, a consulting firm. "They are, more than anything else, grabbing as many tools as possible, being as valuable as possible, constantly pursuing." Since grade school, your parents have overbooked your lives, wheeling you from basketball practice to roller-skating lessons to the library ("RIF: Reading Is Fundamental!"). They, the "Me" generation, wanted their children to be spoiled with every possible option. Like helicopters, they hovered in the background, ready to sweep down, solve crises and offer new destinations. But what, you wonder, is the outcome of all this coddling? And when will the pilots retire, letting you steer into your own future?

Independence no longer happens in college, where officials are acknowledging more interference from parents than ever before. "We get calls about students having roommate problems," says Bob Naples, dean of students at UCLA. "Or they say, 'My son is sick.' That's the kind of thing we might expect to hear at high school." Remember your move-in day at Stanford? Your parents spent the afternoon attending receptions, looking over course catalogs, meeting the kids down the hall and lofting your bed. Wait, folks—who was starting school today? Then again, it could've been worse. During the next four years, you witnessed other parents happily edit their kids' assignments, pick

their majors, chat up professors, buy their textbooks, plan their careers and pay their credit-card bills. Some colleges are finally doing something about it. At Colgate University, parents attend an orientation session that encourages them to let students solve their own problems. "Part of preparing for college is learning to stand on your own two feet," says the university's president, Rebecca Chopp.

No one is saying too much involvement is always bad, especially not the kids who benefit from it. "I remember my parents gave me math workbooks for grades five and four, and I'd do them in grade one or two," says Alison Crocker, a senior at Dartmouth who was awarded a Rhodes scholarship this year. "They got me into doing a lot of things, both academically and athletically." By the second semester of her senior year at George Washington University, Jackie Donohue, 23, didn't have any job prospects, despite her "six to eight" internships. Her parents surprised her one weekend with a visit—for a brainstorm session, where they told her which careers they thought best suited her. It worked. Donohue started her first job, at a public-affairs group in Washington, D.C., the day after graduation. "I think it's funny, because my parents were so tuned in to who I was, they knew exactly what I needed—even though I didn't know I needed it myself," she says. "Yes, they've always been there. But it's not an annoyance. I view my parents as my best friends, really."

But you wonder: would this generation, raised to accomplish so much, be better equipped to handle adulthood if more independence was forced upon them? Most of your friends, who came from elite families and went to top schools, never worked regular jobs at ice-cream parlors or fast-food joints—they were too busy résumé-building. As a result, some 780,000 college graduates a year boomerang back home after graduation. They don't know who they want to be, and their parents, welcoming them back, are often happy to help them plan the next stage of their lives. (After all, the option is better than the alternative: letting them move to a strange city and wander around from place to place until they stumble into something temporary. *No game plan!* Who can imagine success coming from that?) When your friends finally enter the job market, they're often impatient, viewing work as a springboard to greater things. The average adult under 34 holds a job for only 20 months. "The illusion that they're going to get on this magical conveyor belt of a company and ride it out 40 years is completely shattered," says Eric Chester, author of "Getting Them to Give a Damn." There's also less patience for mindless tasks, says Jessica Ashooh, a senior at Brown, who spent a summer in high school as a retail-store clerk. "I hated it," she says. "It was not intellectual. I just wanted to die every day."

In relationships, your generation is finicky at best, and full of loners. They don't really date in college—they "hook up," as if sex is just another mechanical accomplishment, to be tallied and put on a résumé. The problem, friends say, is that you're all too busy. But maybe it goes deeper. Growing up, parents taught you to value perfection—to never settle, to strive only for the best. In love, how can you possibly find another person who meets all the high standards they've set for you? "It's been difficult," says Gustavo Mendez, 21, a junior at Harvard. "When I was younger, I'd start dating a girl and my

mom was critical: 'She has to be very attractive, meet such-and-such criteria.' Even though my mom's not around here, I still imagine her telling me that stuff."

The shrink's question, in the end, is how do you view yourself? The academic—you've been taught to imitate one, after all—would answer this question through literature. To you, your generation has been ping-ponging between two lines from T. S. Eliot: "Indeed there will be time." (For fun, later.) And: "Hurry up please it's time." (For success, now.) But a simpler analogy also comes to mind. You and your friends have lived your lives, for better or worse, through a mirror—reflecting your parents' biggest hopes and, along the way, sacrificing some of your own desires. As a result, you've become smarter, faster, more accomplished. But still, there's something missing. Where's the "I" in your identity? You can't learn that from them.

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