

The Fine Art of Letting Go

As parents, boomers face their final frontier: how to stand aside as their children become independent adults. Where's the line between caring and coddling?

Imagine tears, lots of tears. Imagine a trail of tears trickling across upstate New York. Judie Comerford and her husband, Michael, are in their minivan on a highway somewhere between Potsdam and their home in Buffalo. They've just bid farewell to their oldest child, Meghan, who's starting college. "I cried, and then I cried some more, and then I cried again," Judie recalls. "I didn't think it was possible for someone to cry for going on five hours." The Comerfords were so distraught that they failed to notice the speedometer hitting 92 miles an hour. "The next thing I knew, there were these flashing red lights," Judie says. They pulled over to the side, but the tears kept coming. The trooper asked, "Is there a problem here?" Judie couldn't speak. Michael was no help; he was bawling, too. Finally, Judie blurted out, "We just took my daughter to college. My life is over. She's my little girl."

The cop got it. "I have a little girl," he said. (Perhaps that's why the Comerfords escaped with only a \$15 ticket.) Since that difficult day in 1993, Judie and Michael have said goodbye to three other kids—all now out of school and living successfully on their own. And each time, Judie, a 52-year old medical receptionist, was inconsolable. With all the birds out of the nest, Judie can joke about her overly emotional goodbyes—and about the solace she still gets from talking to her kids on the phone "oh, about 40 times a week." She laughs. "And then there's text messaging, too."

Letting go. Are there two more painful words in the boomer-parent lexicon? One minute, there's an adorable, helpless bundle in your arms. Then, 18 years go by in a flash, filled with Mommy and Me classes, Gymboree, Little League, ballet, drama club, summer camp, traveling soccer teams, piano lessons, science competitions, SAT prep classes and college visits. The next thing you know, it's graduation. Most boomers don't want to be "helicopter parents," hovering so long that their offspring never get a chance to grow up. Well versed in the psychological literature, they know that letting go is a gradual process that should begin when toddlers take their first steps without a parental hand to steady them. And hovering is certainly not a new phenomenon; both Gen. Douglas MacArthur and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had mothers who moved to be near them when they went to college. But with cell phones and e-mail available 24/7, the temptation to check in is huge. Some boomer parents hang on, propelled by love (of course) and insecurity about how the world will treat their children. After years of supervising homework, they think nothing of editing the papers their college students have e-mailed them. A few even buy textbooks and follow the course syllabi. Later they're polishing student résumés and calling in favors to get summer internships. Alarmed by these intrusions into what should be a period of increasing independence, colleges around the country have set up parent-liaison offices to limit angry phone calls to professors and deans. Parent orientations, usually held alongside the student sessions, teach how to step aside.

Letting go is the final frontier for boomer parents, who've made child rearing a major focus of their adult lives. The 76,957,164 Americans born between 1946 and 1964 are the wealthiest and best educated generation of parents in human history, and they've had unparalleled resources to aid them as they've raised an estimated 80 million children. Although there have been some economic ups and downs, unemployment has been generally low, and the rise of two-career families has meant more for all. While their incomes grew, boomers kept family sizes small, thanks to the availability of birth control and abortion. "In the old days, parents thought of kids like waffles," says William Damon, director of the Stanford University Center on Adolescence. "The first couple might not turn out just right, but you could always make more. Now many families have only one or two kids to work with, so they focus all their attention and energy on one or two and want them to do well." An explosion of child-development research stressing the importance of the early years reinforces boomers' determination to give their kids the best. They've carefully followed expert advice on everything from music that nurtures the developing brain in utero to gaming the college admissions process.

By many standards, all that effort has paid off. More students than ever are entering college, and rates of teen pregnancy, crime and drug abuse are all down. And the recipients of that guidance certainly appear to be grateful. "Their connection to their parents is deep and strong," says Barbara Hofer, an associate professor of psychology at Middlebury College who studies the transition to college. "They say, 'My parents are my best friends.' People would have seen that as aberrant a generation ago, as pathological." Hofer and her student Elena Kennedy recently surveyed Middlebury freshmen and found that students and parents reported an average of 10.41 communications per week over cell phone, e-mail, Instant Messenger, dorm phone, text messaging and postal mail. Parents initiate most of this contact, Hofer found, but their children don't seem to mind; most students said they were satisfied with the amount of communication they had with their parents and 28 percent wanted even more with their fathers.

But that closeness is a double-edged sword. When admissions directors get together, sharing horror stories of overinvolved parents is one of their favorite pastimes. "There are cases where the parent tells the adviser that their son wants to be a doctor," says one Midwestern dean, "and these are the classes he wants to take, and then, when the parent leaves the room, the students say, 'I'm not sure I want to be a doctor at all. English and art are more interesting to me'."

Parents who hover risk crippling their children's fledgling sense of self-sufficiency. Missa Murry Eaton, an assistant professor at Penn State University Shenango who studies parent-child relationships, says she's seen a number of parents who think it's OK to call their freshman sons or daughters early in the morning to make sure they wake up or check in late at night to see if they're studying. "They don't allow their children to deal with the consequences of their decisions," says Eaton. "So when a decision goes badly, they just fix it." Children and young adults build up confidence by tackling things that are hard, says Damon. "When they do succeed, they earn real self-esteem."

In fact, it's not the number of e-mails or phone calls that really matter, but the content of the connection. Here, boomers run into trouble. Chatting about the weather or politics is one thing; micromanaging decisions about courses or majors is quite another. But many parents think that economic pressures compel them to intervene. Sending a child to college these days is a huge financial commitment, more than \$40,000 a year at elite private schools. For a lot of parents, that means substantial sacrifices like taking out a second mortgage or cutting into retirement savings. "Parents feel this is an economic investment, and they want that investment to pay off," says Hofer.

What's helpful and what's hovering? At Washington University in St. Louis, Karen Coburn, the assistant vice chancellor for students, says helping parents understand the challenges their students will face is a major part of her job. One important lesson: "No one was ever happy all the time between 18 and 22, and your kids aren't going to be, either." She tells parents to take tearful calls in stride. Walking across campus, she often hears students on the phone with a parent, complaining about a cold or a bad grade. "Then I see them click off the phone and go running over to a friend and say, 'Hi, how are you? Things are great!' And I think of those poor parents, sitting in their offices."

As graduation approaches, there's even more pressure on college career offices and prospective employers. "We have parents calling us to ask why little Johnny wasn't accepted to interview at Goldman," says Jennifer Floren, CEO of experience.com, a Web site that connects 3,800 universities with employers. "They're demanding passwords so they can get into the student's account. It's just bizarre." In an experience.com survey of career-center offices, respondents said parents were substantially more involved than even five years ago and that this trend cut across all regions of the country and all incomes.

Parents worry that their kids will never get jobs and end up home after graduation, living in the basement. It's not an unreasonable fear. Many kids graduate with debt from student loans, which makes it difficult to find affordable housing even if they do find work. According to the 2000 Census, 10.5 percent of Americans 25 to 34 were living in their parents' houses, compared with 8 percent in 1970, the low point for young adults moving home. It takes will power to hold back. Rosalie Fuller knew what she had to do when her oldest son, Brinson, 20, left for Appalachian State University. "I'm trying very hard to force them to leave the nest," she says. Fuller, 48, who lives in New Bern, N.C., and her husband, Walt, 53, a timber buyer for Weyerhaeuser, have agreed to pay for Brinson's tuition, room and board, but he is supposed to pay for fraternity dues, car insurance and general expenses. In the middle of sophomore year, Brinson ran out of cash and the Fullers decided to take over his car-insurance payments but nothing else. Then his grades took a plunge—all C's and D's. The reason: too much partying and not enough studying. In an e-mail, Rosalie told him how many hours a week she spent working for a company that sells aviation fuel in order for him to go to college. "I told him that I would never again pay for a semester like this." Brinson got the message. He wrote her back a three-page

mission statement laying out his plan of action to get better grades. "First and foremost," he wrote, "I will attend every class." Brinson followed up on his promise—his grades are up—and he's leaning toward an accounting major. Closeness to their kids doesn't mean boomers are lenient. Sheila Walker, 51, a grocery clerk from Cleveland, doesn't think there's anything wrong with being in the face of her son, Ronald, 17. "He's a good boy, but I'm the mom," she says. "Part of our responsibility as parents is to know who your kids are with. Technology, like cell phones, makes it easier for us to monitor our kids." This fall, Ronald heads off to college. "Sure, I'm going to miss him," she says, "but I want him to be a man."

Many parents say letting go is hard because the stakes seem so much higher than when they were starting out. At every stage of their parenting careers, they've felt the pressure of competition— whether it's getting their kids into a good preschool, summer camp or college. Boomers might have spent their young-adult years shuffling from major to major or job to job, but many say they'd never condone that behavior in their kids. In fact, experimentation can be critical to real accomplishment, while following lockstep in a preordained path is often deadening. "The idea of taking good risks and doing your best and then learning from whatever happens is a necessary part of becoming a successful person," says Dave Verhaagen, a child and adolescent psychologist in North Carolina and author of "Parenting the Millennial Generation."

Barrie Smith, 45, of Old Westbury, N.Y., concedes that her son, Chase Steinlauf, about to turn 18, who just finished his freshman year at Duke University, has been at the center of her life. "Raising him was my career," she says proudly. She scheduled her days chauffeuring him to tennis, chess and math team. Things really ramped up when the college-admissions race started. She admits she pushed him to apply to the best schools. "You want that Harvard sticker on your car," she says. "They make a lot of connections at these schools."

Chase was a National Merit Scholar and graduated at the top of his class. Still, says Smith, "there was a lot of stress and fighting." She wanted Harvard. "I could see myself there," she says. Chase liked Yale. "He was trying to assert his independence," she says. He didn't succeed. Smith made him apply early to Harvard and he was deferred. He was rejected by Yale and got into Duke. "It was my mistake," Smith says. "I should have let him apply to the college of his choice."

She channeled her anxiety about his leaving into preparing his dorm room. Smith bought Ralph Lauren sheets, a cashmere throw, leather slippers, a sisal rug. "He lives like that at home," she explains. "I wanted to make it homey." Chase says he stuffed the decorative pillows, comforter and cashmere throw into his suitcase. "She likes things formal in a way that I find cluttered," he says diplomatically. Smith nearly passed out from anxiety about Chase's well-being after she dropped him off, but soon afterward, she started a Web site for equally worried moms of freshmen called mofchat.com. "It became a kind of catharsis," she says. When Chase talks about the Web site, he sounds more like the proud parent. "It was a lot more professional than I had anticipated," he says. "It's good to have a place where [parents] can talk to each other."

During college and the first years after graduation, young adults should be learning to make decisions for themselves and dealing with the consequences. Parents can help or hinder that process. "You have to go from manager to consultant, from onsite supervisor to mentor," says Helen Johnson, coauthor of "Don't Tell Me What to Do, Just Send Money." "You have to let them fail and face those tough situations. It's not easy to do. But if you don't, think about the message you are conveying to your son or daughter—that they're not able to handle their own life."

That means a period of adjustment for both parent and child. Tom and Pam Burkardt, who live in suburban Boston, are getting ready for the day their youngest child, Colin, 17, goes to college. "We just told Colin the other day to 'Pick any college and we'll follow you'," says Pam, 52. "We were joking ... sort of." Their older sons—Michael, 22, and Sean, 20—are both in college, but Tom, 47, says he talks to them "all the time," via cell phone, e-mail and instant messaging. When Colin leaves, Tom anticipates "a tough, tough time." But he knows that encouraging his sons' independence is the only way to help them lead happy and productive adult lives. All his sons worked during high school and summers between college semesters even though the family's bank account expanded considerably after Tom sold his telecommunications business. "Just because we have money doesn't mean we're going to spoil them," Tom says. "You have to learn the value of a dollar." Tom's personal measure of success? "Man, it warms my heart when one calls and says, 'Hey Dad, want to play some golf?'"

In the early years of the 20th century, parents hung on to their kids for as long as possible because children, who often started working at a young age, were an important source of income. "The kid would finally have to break away if they wanted to keep any of their own money," says Stephanie Coontz, a family historian at the Evergreen State College in Olympia, Wash. By the time the oldest baby boomers were born, parents expected their kids to grow up and move out—period. Half of all women were married by the age of 20, a move parents generally supported because they thought marriage promoted maturity.

As the older boomers were coming of age in the 1960s and '70s, ideas about leaving home shifted again. Young adults thought they had to rebel against their parents in order to achieve independence, Coontz says. Younger boomers were more likely to suffer from the sharp rise in divorce rates beginning in the late 1960s, which meant that sometimes parents left home before the kids. So both older and younger boomers entered parenthood with strong reasons to find a better way to raise their own children.

Jim Tully, 44, a sales manager for a beef company, was the youngest of six kids. His mother died when he was 9 and his father was working all the time. "There was no helicopter in my house when I was growing up," says Jim, who lives in Brockton, Mass. His wife, Sharon, 43, was the youngest of seven. "Everything is completely different from the way that I grew up," says Jim. "My wife and I dedicate our lives to our children." The four Tully children are now ages 21 to 8. "We talk about the sex, the drugs, the rock and roll," says Jim. In many ways, he says he feels close to his kids because he shares some

of their interests and tastes. "I still love Jimi Hendrix and Aerosmith," says Jim. His daughter Jill, 18, who's going off to college in the fall, says the open relationship she has with her parents keeps her out of trouble. "Because my parents listen to me," she says, "I don't have any secrets from them. We can talk." They have, for example, talked about parties where there might be some drinking. Jill knows that if she did decide to drink, all she would have to do is call home and someone would come and get her. "Because we talk about things so much, I don't even want to drink," she says. "It's the kids whose parents don't talk to them who sneak around and do dumb things." Her parents are her role models. "That's the kind of relationship I want to have with my children in the future," she says.

But to get to that place of mutual trust and respect, parents do have to let go a little. "It is good and healthy for parents to want their kids to be successful, but there are many ways to get there," says Laurence Steinberg, a Temple University psychology professor and the author of "The Ten Basic Principles of Good Parenting." "Part of good parenting is facilitating your child's personal development, not just their accomplishments." Julia Cruz, 58, and her husband, Allen Russell Chauvenet, are both doctors who live in Winston-Salem, N.C. They chose their house because it is just a mile from the hospital where they work and they could be home for dinner with their kids, Nicholas, now 21, and Christina, 19.

As their kids grew older, Julia and Allen worked hard to encourage their independence, but the final goodbyes were wrenching. Julia will never forget the day she dropped Nicholas off at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. As she helped him set up his room, she was crying. Before she left to go home, she told her son she was going off to the other end of campus to get a copy of the parent handbook. Nicholas said he was going to visit a friend. As they walked outside together in the sunny, late August weather, Julia tried to gather her composure. Nicholas said, "Are you going to be all right?" Julia said, "Yes, and you're going to be all right, too." They tearfully embraced. He started walking away. Julia didn't move. She just watched him—her baby—and then watched the girls watching him and suddenly saw him for who he had become, a handsome young man firmly in adulthood. She wanted to cry out a warning: be careful, wear clean clothes, don't fall in love with someone who will break your heart. But she remained silent.

And then her son turned and headed back to his dorm. She stood rooted to the spot while he walked past without seeing her. He was in his new world now.

With Joan Raymond, Pat Wingert, and Marc Bain

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