

# Get a life, parents — and let adult child have one, too.

By Laura Vanderkam *USA Today*, August 25, 2003

When Mary Ann Alexander-Ellis of Lesley College began her career in higher education 30 years ago, parents called mainly about financial matters — navigating loans or where to send the check. Recently, however, a father began his call with, “I know my daughter has to be responsible for her own learning but. ...” She was unhappy with a grade she received at this Massachusetts women’s college. So he called Alexander-Ellis, the director of academic advising.

“Parent involvement in young adult college students’ lives has significantly increased over the past 10-15 years,” she says. “I have had parents come to registration sessions, select courses for their college students, attend advising sessions and summon a meeting with faculty because their student ‘feels’ the faculty grade was based on a personality conflict.”

“Some students share how they feel smothered by their parents in not being allowed to make their own decisions,” Alexander-Ellis says, and “want the freedom to make their own paths and mistakes.” But moms and dads who have hyper-parented since birth aren’t about to stop just because their child is, technically, a grown-up. Cell phones and instant messaging have only made it worse.

Call it hovering. Call it “helicoptering.” Call it what happens when the technology to stay in touch crashes into affluent parents who refuse to let precious Ashley or Dylan be — or won’t set limits when their darling clings like a toddler to mommy’s skirt.

Technology makes it easier to hold on. But as parents discover when Ashley and Dylan later want to move back home or act like adolescents until they’re 30, they have given their children everything but a sense of independence.

College is as good a time as any to cut the umbilical cord — and our ruggedly independent society depends on parents doing just that.

Today’s college students are wired to stay in touch: 93% have Internet access, according to a 2002 Harris Interactive Poll, and 88% own computers. Two-thirds have cell phones, key to a quick parental chat on the way to class.

## Still not grown up

Technology is neutral, but it shapes social forces. In this case, it blends with smaller, affluent families that can invest more effort in each child, and a job market that requires at least a bachelor’s degree. In years past, 20-year-olds were deemed ready to work, marry, procreate. Now, we’ve extended adolescence five to 10 years.

Not all see this as a crisis. Dean of Student Affairs Pat Oles of Skidmore College calls his charges “emerging adults” — young people still tethered to the nest for decision-making and emotional support. “It doesn’t seem pathological to me,” he says. In

many families, it’s “obvious that the students and parents have a good relationship. They’re routinely consulting each other.” Colleges affirm that relationship by addressing whole families in their literature and offering orientation sessions for parents.

Yet “consulting” looks suspiciously like parents still calling the shots. And the longer parents wash socks, choose classes and mediate relationships, the harder the eventual fall from the nest will be.

“It’s flabbergasting how youth have changed,” says Dr. Elisa Medhus, former family physician, mom of five and author of the upcoming *Raising Everyday Heroes: Parenting Self-Reliant Children*. “Many kids don’t know how to hard boil an egg. Our job as parents is to work ourselves out of a job. Right now we’re sending the message, ‘I don’t have faith in you to deal.’”

## Limits for students, parents

Laura Kastner, co-author of *The Launching Years*, notes that too much contact can be part of the problem: “Parents who trust their children can wait those three days (between phone calls). Anxious parents want immediate relief and will use the cell phone three times a day until the kids shut them off.”

Set limits beforehand, she suggests, and if students are the needy ones, “Remind them that they’re competent kids — that’s how they got to school in the first place.”

Parents who call after every date have the best of intentions. But our youth-worshiping culture already says that dependency is more pleasant than adulthood, with its pesky jobs, checkbook balancing and health insurance woes. Kids who don’t ease into life in college will find the real world a slap in the face. Many will return home. The 2000 Census found 55% of men and 46% of women ages 18-24 lived with their parents. A bad economy has many parents bankrolling adult children, despite their own ill 401(k)s.

To see where this leads, look at Italy, where a full 30% of 30- to 34-year-old men live with mom, and an unsustainably low birthrate is the result. Last year, an Italian appeals court ordered a wealthy father to support his adult son, saying, “You cannot blame a young person, particularly from a well-off family, who refuses a job that does not fit his aspirations.”

Italians at least have the “Old Europe” mind-set excuse — family shapes destiny. America clings to the concept that your parents do not define who you are.

People who refused to leave home couldn’t have settled the frontier; people who need parental support to challenge a grade won’t take the risks that make this country a new place every day.

Occasional e-mails never hurt. But as Alexander-Ellis says, “It’s not healthy for parents to stay in daily contact with their college students,” because most parents tend to rescue. Those who do “are truly doing a disservice and hampering their college students in becoming independent thinkers and doers.”

Society needs more independent thinkers and doers. So cut the umbilical cord already. Dylan and Ashley will learn.

New York-based writer Laura Vanderkam is a member of USA TODAY’s board of contributors. © Copyright 2003 USA TODAY, a division of Gannett Co. Inc.