

When It's Time for Them to "Get a Life"

“**W**hat do I do? I'm at my wits' end! My grown son still lives at home. He won't respect any of our house rules. He doesn't clean up after himself. He just lounges around the house and never lifts a finger to do anything.

“And, worse yet, we can't seem to motivate him to get a job. He isn't even civil to us. When we try to tell him to treat us better and that he needs to get a job, he gets belligerent and tells us to get off his case.”

You might be amazed at how often I hear about a situation such as this. Upon being asked about this problem, I usually inquire about who is subsidizing this irresponsible son's easy lifestyle. Whose food is he eating? Whose car is he driving? Whose utilities is he using?

The answer is usually, “Well, ours, but...” This is often followed with a list of explanations, excuses, and reasons related to, “Well, he doesn't have the money to take care of himself,” or “He has to save his money because he wants to buy a car.”

Please tell me, readers, would you put up with this for one minute if it were anyone but your own child sucking off of your personal resources, while at the same time treating you with such disrespect? Of course not! You'd say, “Out! Get a life!” The answer is easy to see when it doesn't involve your own child.

A surefire way to cripple a person is to allow him/her to sponge off you. People who are warm, comfortable, protected, and well fed usually have little motivation to change their lifestyles.

The way to motivate a person to get off the couch, look for a job and become personally responsible is to take away his free ride through life. The way to teach a child how to take care of himself by taking care of yourself.

This means telling him you no longer can provide room and board.

This is scary for many parents, who say, “But that's so mean. He will hate me if I make him move out, and I just feel so guilty asking him to pay room and board.”

He will not hate you. In fact, normal humans hate to feel dependent upon others. Since this hate is so painful, it is usually transferred to the person who provides the support. Hostility/dependency takes the form of angry, hostile, hateful behavior.

Many adult children who have been asked to leave the home are angry at first. They try using guilt on their parents. They often do their best to prove the parents made a big mistake.

Many of these youngsters actually appear to hit “rock bottom” in their desperate attempts to get the parents to relent and allow them to return to the security of the parents' home. Some of them try rejection. They leave home and don't write or call for a period of time.

The good news is that they eventually make overtures to come back into the relationship with the parents. And in most cases, they thank the parents for forcing them to grow up. I've heard many of them telling their parents: “Putting me out of the home was the best thing you ever did for me. Thanks for making a man out of me.”

A typical reaction to my advice about asking children to make a new home for themselves is, “I can't just throw him out! What will he do?”

When a parent asks, “What will he do?” we now understand part of the problem. It's a good guess the son

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never has worried about what he will do. He subconsciously knows he won't have to be concerned about it. His parents have taken over that responsibility for him. It's not his problem. It's their problem.

The first step toward a solution is for the parent to believe, "If I don't concern myself with what he will do, he will have to take over that concern."

Once that step is taken, that parent can take on the most important role of parenting, that of teaching the child to take care of himself by demonstrating how it is done.

Solving the Problem

When parents don't have a history of taking care of themselves and when the youngster is hostile/dependent, the stage is set for very difficult communication. This is not a good time to discuss the youngster's leaving the nest.

I suggest it is better for the parents to provide the youngster with a "Good Neighbor Policy Letter." Putting your thoughts into writing raises the odds that the young man can get the entire thoughts of the parents without being able to or feeling a need to become defensive or to start another argument.

The following is a letter that was used very effectively by some loving parents:

Dear Son,

We love you very much and want the best for you. So, we are writing to you instead of talking with you in hopes that you will think about this for a few days before feeling the need to respond.

Our greatest dream for you is that we help you grow up to be independent, happy and able to take good care of yourself.

In our enthusiasm to make this happen, we have made some mistakes. We thought our lectures and criticism would help you, but they have only damaged our relationships with you. For that, we are genuinely sorry.

We didn't realize we would first have to take care of ourselves or you would never be able to see how it was done. We wish to apologize for this and admit that we have a lot of catching up to do if we are really going to help you learn to take care of yourself.

The way we are going to do this is through what is known as the "Good Neighbor Policy." From now on all of our decisions about you will be based on the Good Neighbor Policy.

For example, if a good neighbor came to us needing a place to stay, we would allow him/her to stay with us for a short time. We would provide room and board at a reduced rate, providing the neighbor paid in advance and was willing to live by our house rules. That way, he/she could continue to have self-respect and independence.

As of the last day of this month you will have the opportunity. You may live here at a room-and-board rate of \$400 per month—payable in advance on the first day of the month—if you are willing to live by our house rules. Or, you have the option of living elsewhere by your own house rules.

If you choose to live elsewhere and are kind enough to let us visit you from time to time, we agree to live by your house rules while in your home.

We know this is a difficult decision. We know that sometimes sons have difficulty telling their parents it is time for them to be on their own.

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In the event you can't decide, we will assume that you have a hard time telling us you want to live elsewhere and have arranged for the movers to take your belongings to Acme Storage Rental, Unit #31, on the first day of the month.

We have rented this storage space for you in your own name and have paid for two months rent as our way of helping with the transition.

Please know this is in no way a rejection of you on our part, but an expression of our deep love, confidence and concern for you, as well as our sincere desire to see you happy and independent.

*Please accept our best wishes and love,
Mom and Dad*

Yes the youngster who received this letter was angry. He said, "Fine, if that's the way you want it, I'm out of here!"

His parents did not hear one word from or about him for six weeks. Then they heard through his friends that he had moved in with some of his buddies, but they kicked him out because he didn't pay his share of the expenses. He then moved in with some other young men, but they also threw him out.

During the eighth week he called. "Well, I guess you want my phone number.? His mom replied, "Sure if you want us to have it."

"And I suppose you want to know my address!"

"Sure, if you want us to have it. Thanks for calling. We love you and hope you are doing well."

The following week he called to say, "I suppose you want to know where I'm working."

Needless to say, this young man and his parents have a much better relationship now. And, isn't this why we raise children, to produce independent adults who can lead their own happy, independent lives?

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Jim Fay is one of America's most sought-after presenters and authors in the area of parenting and school discipline. His background includes 31 years as a teacher and administrator, over three decades as a professional consultant, and many years as the parent of three children. Jim's sense of humor and infectious spirit have made his interviews, audios, videos, and books popular with educators and parents as well as the national news media. Jim has discovered that fun stories are the most powerful way of helping people learn. He often comments, "People seem to learn best when they giggle." You will find this delightful quality in many of our Love and Logic products.

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