

## Generation boomerang: how to cope with grown-up children at home

They fly the nest... but before you know it they're back – and stroppier than their teenage selves. Glynis Kozma lays down the law.



Graduates moving home is hardly surprising in today's economic climate, but their return can come as a shock to mum and dad Photo: ALAMY

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By **Glynis Kozma**

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I recently bumped into a neighbour, Julia, in the vegetable aisle at our local supermarket. "I'm fed up," she confided. "I'm having to completely rethink meals; he never knows what time he'll be home and is demanding food that can be reheated. He's ransacked the cupboards and thrown out everything he considers unhealthy. And then there are his shoes all over the house."

I'd always thought her husband so reasonable. And I was right – she was talking about her son, who had moved back home after three years at university: the prodigal child.

I empathised. My own son, who is now 26, came back to live with us after university when he found that his first job wasn't paying enough to fund a house share elsewhere. He ended up staying for two years. My daughter, now 24, did the same, and though her stay was much shorter, the experience took its toll.

Graduates moving home is hardly surprising, given today's high rents and low salaries. But it still came as a shock when three years' worth of possessions returned home and my house was suddenly filled with backpacks filled with rock-climbing equipment, sets of pans, slow cookers, blenders, crockery, clothes and dozens of books. Only so much could fit into their bedrooms. If I asked tentatively: "Do you really need this?" I was met with an adamant: "Yes! Do not throw anything out!" My loft, garage and garden shed were bursting at the seams and I felt overwhelmed.

The challenge of fitting the contents of another home or two into your average size house is only one of many that land on your doorstep when boomerang children return. Having emerged, battle-weary, from the furious arguments you engaged in during their teenage years, you now find yourself having to go over old territory and renegotiate the terms surrounding food, laundry and late nights.

Your truculent teens are now young adults with discerning tastes, which rarely dovetail with yours. Both my children were at university at the same time, meaning I had grown used to the heady feeling of having my home to myself again. I could play my Eighties music loudly, eat whatever I liked and go to sleep when it suited me. Yes, they came home between terms, but only for a few weeks and we all managed to rub along with a good measure of tolerance.

But following graduation they were back on a semi-permanent basis, and it was different. Post-student living is hardly compatible with that of fiftysomething parents. My idea of a relaxing Friday evening is a spell in front of Gardeners' World followed by an early night.

One such night, I had naively assumed my daughter had similar plans when I heard the sound of a bath running. Imagine my confusion when she appeared, fully dressed and preened, at 10pm: "Any chance of a lift out?"

I didn't want to be the one to deny them their social life. They weren't doing anything unreasonable by their standards. But I am too old to be awakened at 2am by the key in the front door and to spend the night worrying if they are coming home at all. Hadn't I said goodbye to this years ago? No matter how much they would promise to come in quietly – and they really did try – I would wake at the slightest creak of the stairs, the noises in the kitchen while they made tea and sandwiches, and would still be awake hours later.

A quick straw poll of my friends tells me this is a common experience. "When Alice came home after university she wanted to live like a student, with no consideration for anyone," her mother, Lucy, explained to me. "She'd come in late, put lights on and we'd wake up. Then she'd wonder why we were in such a terrible mood the following day. I didn't know if she'd be home at all, her plans could change by the minute."

Another friend, Susie, had the same issues with her son Ben. After countless sleepless nights wondering where he was, she decided that a "don't ask" policy was the way forward. "After four years away, Ben struggled with our interest in the details of where he was going and who he was going with, all the things parents like to know. So we came to an agreement: we would limit our interrogation as long as he would tell us something – the stuff he felt happy to share."

Four years on he's obviously happy with the arrangement: he's still living at home.

In my own house, I tried to establish some ground rules. I needed to be asleep not long after 11pm on week nights. If they wanted to stay up later they could – in their own rooms. But they had to use headphones if they listened to music and not have loud animated phone conversations with other nocturnal friends.

My children, like Lucy's daughter, never knew whether they were going to be coming home at night or staying with a friend. Ah, the spontaneity of youth. I was secretly rather envious, but middle age made me worry more about whether to fasten the door chain. We eventually agreed on a phone call by 11pm to confirm plans.

Another challenge was food, including what sort, how much and when it's eaten.

After three years of self-catering, some, like Julia's son, have become frustratingly fussy. Mine didn't mind what they ate, they just wanted more. My mantra (as I threw food into the trolley for the third time in a week) became: "I must buy more potatoes." I completely misjudged how much young men, in particular, need to eat, especially if they do lots of sport. The vat of mash which could feed two middle-age adults for a week

would be met with a dismayed: "Is that all there is?" Out went omelettes for supper; serious cooking in vast quantities was back on the menu.

"Why not cook your own meals?" I snapped in exasperation. Then I recalled the wall-to-wall grease in their student kitchens. Maybe that wasn't such a good idea. We compromised: once a week or so my son or daughter would cook – which they enjoyed – and most importantly, they would clear up (to my standards), too.

I also gave my children the task of cleaning their own rooms, although more often than not they just wouldn't bother. I gave up on that one. They were strangely possessive about their laundry, which meant they'd do that all themselves, too. Great! But I had to beg for no whirring washing machine after I'd gone to bed; washes that were a full load, not a single T-shirt; and for them to think about the cost of tumble drying, please.

I felt as though I'd turned into an overbearing landlady, and that the order I'd created in their absence was threatened.

I realise that when children return you each have to adjust, and as a mother I felt ground rules were essential. Can there be a happy outcome to three or four adults living together? Lucy remarked to me that her daughter has moved out twice and moved back twice, so she can't have found it too awful.

My own son and daughter are now living independently, cooking and cleaning brilliantly, and we have a good relationship. When they come home they are always considerate. But that rock-climbing equipment is still under the bed.