

SOCIETY

YOU CAN GO HOME AGAIN

THE SOURCE: “Holding Them Closer” by Carl Desportes Bowman, in *The Hedgehog Review*, Fall 2013.

THE NOTION NOW SEEMS AS ANTIQUE AS A one-room schoolhouse, but there was a time when American parents fervently hoped their children would grow up, leave home, and establish independent, self-reliant lives. “However painful the process of leaving home, for parents

and for children,” a team of sociologists observed in that distant time, “the really frightening thing for both would be the prospect of the child *never* leaving home.”

Actually, the time was only 1985, and the book was the now classic *Habits of the Heart*, by Robert Bellah and others. Today’s parents, writes Carl Desportes Bowman in *The Hedgehog Review*, have very different feelings, reflecting deep changes in American culture, not some temporary response to the exigencies of today’s job market.



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Will they still be playing the same game 20 years from now?

According to Bowman, who is director of survey research at the University of Virginia's Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, almost three-quarters of parents of school-age children in an institute survey said they hoped they would be best friends with their children after they grew up. Two-thirds of the respondents said they would gladly support a 25-year-old child financially if necessary, and would encourage their offspring to move back home if affordable digs were hard to find. The word "home" itself has evolved; it's now common for people in their twenties and thirties to use it to describe the place where their parents live.

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Such changes reflect the fact that "adulthood has become a subjective category," Bowman writes. No longer do classic life landmarks such as a landing a job, setting up a household, and starting a family mark the entry into adulthood; now, it's one's "*self-perception* of autonomy and freedom that matters." And it's easy for young people to develop that self-perception in an age when children

are equipped with cell phones, charge cards, and Internet connections. Bowman says that adolescents "grow up in a peer-dominated bubble," immersed in "gadgets, studies, and peer-centered activities." But these bubble-bred children are poorly equipped to deal with such adult tasks as ironing clothes and applying for a job; the race to leave home has become a "leisurely stroll."

That's not to say that parents have become total softies. Seventy percent of the parents in the institute's survey said it was their job to "direct" their children rather than "negotiate" with them. Those who considered themselves strict outnumbered self-identified permissive parents two to one, and 81 percent said they had spanked a child at least once (though few considered this a standard practice).

To understand what's changed, Bowman goes back to sociologist David Riesman's 1950 classic *The Lonely Crowd*, in which the Harvard professor famously described an affluent, industrialized America whose populace was in transition from being "inner-directed" to "other-directed." In the old world of fixed values and social roles, people were generally guided by an internal "gyroscope" set in their youth. But Riesman argued that consumer society, with its

many entertainments and shifting social roles, was breeding a new kind of person, one who tended to take behavioral cues from others. Today's parents are, in effect, the first full other-directed generation.

Nothing is more unsettled in the new world Riesman described than human relationships, from friendship to marriage, which tend to be based less on fixed commitments defined by social roles and other forces, and more on personal choice. The British sociologist Anthony Giddens calls modern relationships "free-floating," surrounded by anxiety. Another sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman, observes that parenting, in Bowman's words, "is not just an activity of loving care for a dependent being, but of meeting one's own emotional and identity needs in a world where larger institutional commitments, projects, and sources of identity, for many,

have lost their luster."

The parent-child relationship is forever a work in progress, like a transaction in which "the eventual value of the purchase remains uncertain and the full costs are unknown." Having cast aside the old certainties, parents are left to chart their own course in defining values during child rearing—and are often left looking to their own children "for feedback on how they are doing."

Ultimately, Bowman writes, the return parents seek is "an emotional anchor of connection, assurance they are not being set aside or rendered irrelevant by their children in the same way they might be at work or in other socially limited relationships. In an age when 'Father' and 'Mother' no longer carry the intrinsic authority and respect accorded in a by-gone age, 'best friends' may be parents' best attempt at sustaining something meaningful and enduring." ■