



Jessica Grose On Parenting

The Nuclear Family Is No Longer the Norm. Good.

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Over 20 years ago, the sociologist [Vern Bengtson](#) gave a lecture in which he predicted [that multigenerational bonds would be ascendant](#) in the 21st century. Bengtson, who spent decades studying [generations of 300 California families](#), pushed back against the idea that the decline of the nuclear family model was bad for society.

Even two decades ago, Americans were increasingly moving away from the “mom, dad and two kids” family structure that corresponded with the norms and pop culture of the 1950s. As years went on, more people got divorced, more people were having children outside marriage, and older generations were living longer. Some, like David Popenoe of Rutgers University, saw this as a crisis for children, [writing in 1993](#), “I see the family as an institution in decline and believe that this should be a cause for alarm.” But Bengtson theorized that these changes could be positive and protective, economically and emotionally. He wrote, “For many Americans, multigenerational bonds are becoming more important than nuclear family ties for well-being and support over the course of their lives.”

This argument was “a little scoffed at at the time,” said Merrill Silverstein, a professor of sociology at Syracuse University who researches aging and was a colleague of Bengtson’s at the University of Southern California. But Bengtson, who died in 2019, was prescient: [A new report from Pew Research Center](#) found that “multigenerational living has grown sharply in the U.S. over the past five decades and shows no sign of peaking.”

Analyzing census data, Pew found that the population living in multigenerational households in the United States has quadrupled since 1971. In March 2021, nearly 60 million people were living “with multiple generations under one roof.” According to Pew, while these living arrangements are more common in Asian, Black and Hispanic households, they are also rising among non-Hispanic white Americans. (Immigration accounts for part of the increase in the U.S., Pew said, with extended families still the norm in many regions and countries, save for parts of North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand, [according to the U.N.’s population division](#).)

As part of the same report, Pew examined data from its own nationally representative survey of 9,676 adults, including 1,548 living in multigenerational households, to see why they were choosing to live with extended family and how they felt about their living situations. The top two reasons for multigenerational living were financial issues and caregiving needs. And overall, Americans who live with relatives from other generations feel good about it: “More adults living in

multigenerational households say the experience has been very positive (30 percent) or somewhat positive (27 percent) than say it has been somewhat negative (14 percent) or very negative (3 percent),” Pew noted.

As the historian Stephanie Coontz wrote, the idealized American nuclear family, with a father as breadwinner and mother as caregiver, living atomized from the rest of their community, was a “[historical fluke](#),” and throughout history, parents have [always relied on relatives and friends](#) for help with the caregiving of children.

You don’t even have to share a residence to realize major benefits; they just need to live nearby. The Times’s Quoc Trung Bui and Claire Cain Miller discovered in 2015 that American adults lived a median distance of just [18 miles from their mothers](#), and they cited a 2013 paper [by the economists Janice Compton and Robert Pollak](#), who found that “labor force participation by married women with children increased by as much as 10 percentage points when they lived near their mothers or mothers-in-law and unanticipated child care needs seemed to play a big role.”

I’ve personally found this to be true. We live about 10 miles from my parents, and they’ve saved my bacon in the child care department more times than I can count. If we hadn’t lived with them during part of 2020 when child care was unavailable and we had two kids at home, my husband or I would have had to take a leave from work. Beyond the child care piece of it, my children see my parents once a week for dinner, which everyone enjoys. Sometimes for kids, grandparental relationships can be a little less fraught than those with parents: Grandma doesn’t have to be the one dropping the hammer, making you do homework and brush your teeth every night. She can be a source of support with less rancor.

Despite the upsides, living with your parents into adulthood is sometimes still portrayed as something embarrassing, a failure to launch, but it shouldn’t be. In fact, it’s now the norm.

“In 2014, for the first time in more than 130 years, adults ages 18 to 34 were slightly more likely to be living in their parents’ home than they were to be living with a spouse or partner in their own household,” [Pew found](#), and that [remained true in 2021](#) for men in that age group.

[Steven Ruggles](#), a professor of history and population studies at the University of Minnesota, told me that this is happening, in part, because the relative incomes of young men have been [steeply declining](#) since the 1970s, and they are more likely than their female counterparts to be living at home. At the same time, [housing](#)

[prices are way up](#), availability is way down, and especially in big cities, buying a home is out of reach for most young people; this is an economic fact of life right now, and no one should be mocked for it.

That said, multigenerational living isn't some kind of utopia. "Those with upper incomes were the most likely to say their experience had been positive," Juliana Horowitz, an associate director of social trends research at Pew told me, partly because "upper-income people are more likely to say there's enough space for everyone to live comfortably." It's not surprising that it might be more relaxing to live with your mother when she has her own floor. And some of the growth in multigenerational households is due to [more grandparents raising grandchildren](#), which has been fueled in part by the opioid crisis that is devastating the country. No one would say that's a good thing.

Per Pew, "About a quarter of adults in multigenerational homes say it is stressful all or most of the time." Bengtson predicted this years ago in his address. "There are potentially negative consequences of the longer years of shared lives across generations," he said, one of which is "protracted conflict." He quoted one mother who described "a lifelong lousy parent-child relationship" that just stretched out to infinity. No one said the new norm didn't come with challenges — and no one, not me anyway, is against the nuclear family model. But we should acknowledge its fragility, which was made ever clearer by the Covid pandemic and the chaos it wrought in all of our infrastructures of care.

Which is why I think moving toward a more extended family model — what sociologists call a vertical rather than a horizontal family structure — is mostly to the good. During the pandemic, a Harvard study found that Americans ages 18 to 25 and mothers of young children were the demographic groups [most likely to report](#) "miserable degrees of loneliness," and even before the pandemic, the Health Resources and Services Administration described a "[loneliness epidemic](#)," which was particularly acute among seniors.

"I think it's a net positive," said Silverstein. "In gerontology, we like to say dependence is a double-edged sword. We want to rely on people, but we also resent them, and that's part of the human condition." Do I still act like a sulky teenager sometimes when I'm around [my parents for more than 48 hours](#)? I do! Would I move away from them? Nope, not if I could help it.
