

Helping ‘Revolving Door Families

For many, the door that let the grown chicks out of the nest has become a revolving door. Children who left for school, for jobs, to follow their dreams, or to start their own families, are coming back home again and again and again! For a variety of reasons—some emotional, some economic—children who used to leave home to make their own homes and lives are increasingly coming back to the safety and security of the nest and many are bringing one or more of their own children along. The empty nest, once signifying “mission accomplished,” is prompted to become an occasion for ongoing welcome, a mountain of good intent and an opportunity to define new roles and expectations.

Thoughtful and careful planning is necessary to make an empty nest a viable three-generation household. It is important for all in these households to remember that the children who came home are now adults. They need to be treated as adults. Parents who are able to move into a mutual friendship (as opposed to a parent/child relationship) with their grown children certainly will be able to live together more peacefully. Beyond that, a few thoughtful conversations can make “living together” a little easier the second and third time around.

- Even before the door swings open again, agree on “rules for the house” that will work for everyone. Who does the cooking, cleaning, shopping, laundry? What about bedtimes? How will expenses be shared? Will those who have returned home pay rent? If so, how much? Who disciplines children and how?
- Additional agreements might set limits on built-in babysitting. Parents who feel taken for granted can become resentful.
- Make it a goal to help each family unit become independent again. Multigenerational households can work over a long period of time, but conflict is inevitable. For most, separate households for each family unit will be best in the long run.

Congregations Can Support Multi-generational Families in These Ways

- Provide a support group for the primary providers of the “revolving doors” in your community. Participants can share common issues even though their situations may be unique. You may also wish to provide support, fellowship, and activity groups for young adults who are coping with prolonged goals and transitions in their lives. Single parents also deserve occasions for conversation and support, as do grandparents who are finding themselves in a position to parent again.
- Schedule Christian education classes for young adults that are designed to address their specific needs and interests. Invite young adults in your congregation and community to help plan these events. You might even consider presenting them within the context of a coffeehouse.
- Provide access to child care at a reasonable cost for single parents. Facilitate the creation of a co-op nursery or day care to address multiple needs as young parents partner to accommodate one another’s schedules.
- Consider including babysitting as an option for a confirmation service project or an option for congregational service.
- Create your own “Big Brother/Sister” program for after-school play or companionship.
- Sponsor workshops that focus on practical skill building and support, budget planning, child care, time management. You may wish to partner with another community organization to promote and present these events.
- Equip your church library with a relevant listing of books to equip and support individuals and families who find themselves in similar situations. Reference AARP (formerly known as the American Association of Retired Persons) www.aarp.org/confacts/programs/grandraising.html as a supportive organization.

- Take time to acknowledge and affirm families in these situations. Encourage them to keep faith, grace, and prayer at the center of their households. Expressions of love and forgiveness are invaluable when several generations try to live together.

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