



When the peer momentum is lost or becomes negative, launchings can become complicated.

Complicated Launchings

by Sophia K. Havasy, Ph.D.

YEARS AGO THE SOCIAL SCIENTIST, Bernice Neugarten, Ph.D., coined the phrase: “on track, on time.” She was referring to young people who graduate from high school, go on to college, graduate, get a good job, get married and continue on with their well-planned lives. They don’t seem to miss a beat and their lives appear to just unfold naturally.

For young people with AD/HD, learning disabilities, self-management difficulties or emotional challenges, their paths often have many stops and starts, along with detours and occasional derailments. They do not meet the “on track, on time” expectations. This can be highly frustrating for the individuals and their families. Arrest warrants, credit card debt and academic probation were never part of the original vision anyone held of the high school graduate who now wants to be independent. I identify these particular changes as—*complicated launchings*.



In our culture, the path through young adulthood to independence is the last developmental stage that operates out of a collective. The development occurs in the body, in the brain and in the culture. Teenage bodies become adult bodies and the brain has its last major growth spurt. Momentum and energy are an inherent part of a graduating class—a peer group that is moving forward—whether from high school, college, technical training or boot camp.

Peer influences can be both negative and positive. As a society, we rely on the peer group to encourage a young adult to make something of his or her life, to get ahead, settle down and be responsible. There is encouragement that *only* matters when it comes from peers. It forces the individual to find some extra spark or ability deep inside: “If they can do it, I can do it.” We all have experienced this in our lives and it is not so different from the time when you were 10 years old and had to muster every bit of courage to go off of the high dive. You did it because you saw your friends and even children younger than yourself do it.

When the peer momentum is lost or becomes negative, launchings can become complicated. The young adult becomes separated from a peer group where the future was laid out, and the forward momentum is derailed. Flunking out of college, being terminated from a branch of the military, the inability to hold a job or getting a DUI can place the young adult at risk, and the result can be a shattered sense of future.

If the original plan following high school graduation is not pursued, (going off to college because that is what everyone else is doing) it can be very difficult to recapture the plan when the group momentum is lost. These are the young people who seem adrift, lacking real goals or a sense of direction. They often return home because they lack the resources to go elsewhere. If they stay connected to peers, those peers are often drifting as well. The parents are then left to encourage their child back out into the world, while feeling particularly burdened and befuddled by their child’s lack of direction.

At this point, it is difficult to get the young adult moving again. Inertia sets in. Conflicts arise. The disagreements may involve money, late-night hours, laundry, lack of help around the house, sleeping late, getting a job, negatively influencing younger siblings and so on. It is now the parents’ job to help the young adult find a new direction and plan without enabling dysfunctional and irresponsible behaviors. Parents have to keep a long-term perspective, which can be very difficult, especially when the short-term is fraught with so much conflict.

When the young adult does not leave home or returns home after an attempt at launching, where he or she will live becomes an issue. Parents were ready for their child to move forward, and now the young adult is taking a step backward. In addition, the young adult does not want to return home. The freedom to

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come and go without having to answer to anyone is appealing and often hard to give up. It is not easy for the parents to live with a young adult who is not financially independent and has no clear direction or goals for the future.

To end the conflicts, many parents consider establishing the young person in his or her own apartment. This becomes a false launching, as the result is a financially subsidized young adult who is always asking for more money, while the parents become increasingly resentful. At this point, despite the difficulty of the situation, the parents must insist that the young adult move back home until practical goals and a direction are determined. The discomfort of living with one's parents can be part of the incentive to establish a plan for one's life. Optimal levels of frustration inspire growth, and frustration is one way to tap into the collective momentum to launch again.

At this stage, parents are usually not the ones to whom the young person will listen. Actual life experience is often more effective. How the young adult learns from the experience is often difficult. Everyone hopes that the lessons will not have to be too harsh—winding up in jail for a DUI or unpaid traffic tickets

are not situations someone would choose for their child. Parents have to carefully think about how they will help their young person out of trouble, since assuming responsibility for their young adult is not always the best solution. Parents need to take steps to ensure that the young adult begins to accept the consequences of his or her actions. As adults, parents recognize that they are held accountable by society, by the people they work for, by their families and by themselves.

Part of getting back on track involves helping the young adult to realize that what he or she does today has future consequences—good or bad. Under these conditions, parents are challenged to lead by example and to clearly define support, as well as its limits. If you assist your young adult by hiring a lawyer, then make your child's repayment of that debt to you as important as your not wanting him in jail. If support and assistance are taken for granted, then the odds increase that you will find yourself repeating a similar situation again.

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things cost and experience the consequences of debt or the lack of health insurance. Young adults need to appreciate how hard their parents have worked to provide for them. In order to help their children understand and benefit from these lessons, parents need to sort out their goals and fears, and establish clearly defined limits. For example, they may support the young person being in therapy with a counselor, but not pay for a trip to Cancun with some friends.

Education is often a priority for parents, so much so that at times, parents will continue to invest in their child's education despite low academic performance and marginal completions of semesters. Parents may often be willing to invest in their son or daughter's good intentions rather than in their consistent functioning. When college has become a revolving door, I often recommend to parents that they let the young

adult pay his or her own tuition at the community college. I suggest they reimburse the student for courses where a C or better has been attained. Parents will also want to request that they see the *actual* report card and not just take the young person's word for it.

To those parents reading this article whose children are on track, on time—congratulations!—you must be relieved. To the other parents, recognize that each person's path may be unique. Think positively—it is very possible that your young person will grow up and be a happy and successful adult despite the fact that his or her lessons are not on track and on time! ■

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