

Stayputs' fourth age

Fifty years ago, children went to school, grew up and left home, often once they reached university or their first job. By their late teens they had flown the parental coop and were establishing their own lives.

Fast forward to the present and it's a different scenario. According to official statistics in 2003, 46 percent of 20-24 year-olds were still living at home. And about half of those were still students. In the 1950s, the average age of leaving home was about 20, and many of those left home to marry and start full-time working lives.

We are living in very different social situations from those of a generation or two ago. From a psychological perspective, the boundaries that divide childhood, adolescence and adulthood have changed.

There is now a fourth stage of development that fits in between adolescence and adulthood, described as "emerging adulthood". That's the developmental stage our 20-24 year-olds who live at home fit into. They're not as yet independent adults, but are certainly more than adolescents.

This stage can be confusing for parents because there are no black-and-white yardsticks that can guide you down the road. Once upon a time, if you wished to have a partner stay overnight you had a choice: either leave home and marry or move into a share house away from parental eyes.

But with emerging adults in their early 20s wanting to experience full relationships but still needing to live at home, a new situation has arisen for parents to come to terms with.

The blanket understanding of "no sex with approval under our roof" that may have applied when they were teenagers is not quite so easy to apply to them once they are adults. Yet they are still dependent to an extent because they live under the parental roof, so a series of delicate negotiations between all parties may be needed here.

Why are these emerging adults still living at home? For many the reason is financial.

More 20-somethings are staying in the education system longer so they can get qualifications that will earn them a good living.

But the presence of this new generation of emerging adults can be rather confusing for parents, so for everyone to survive happily in the household, there needs to be negotiation around expectations, responsibilities and boundaries.

Ignore the need for this at your own peril.

Survival tips

- **Nearly half of 20-24 year-olds live at home**
- **They belong to a new developmental group that bridges adolescence and adulthood**
- **Delicate negotiations between parents and emerging adults may be needed for everyone to live together in harmony**