

## THE NEW AMERICAN SUPER-FAMILY

Amanda Gentle and millions like her are proving Thomas Wolfe<sup>1</sup> wrong. You can go home again.

Like so many other Americans, Gentle was hit hard as the financial dominoes fell in 2008. The value of her house dropped while property taxes soared. When she was laid off from her job as director of marketing and sales for a small publishing company, she could no longer keep up. So, at 35 years old, Gentle did what numerous other 20- and 30-somethings are doing: She moved back in with her parents. “It was difficult,” Gentle readily admits. “I had a successful career, and I went from being on my own, in a good place, to basically starting over.”

Gentle is not alone. Adult children of boomers<sup>2</sup> – famously overeducated and underemployed – have created a moving-back-home tsunami. The driving force behind this trend is financial pressure, particularly rising housing costs, health insurance premiums, and college debt. Now, more than one in five young adults lives in multi-generational households.

But it’s not just the young who are coming home to roost. Many elderly parents of boomers are moving in with their children as well. All told, the number of multi-gen households grew about 30 percent during the past decade, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. It reflects a turning back to what used to be, well, normal.

“We had a 50-year experiment of thinking of families as two parents and two kids,” says John Graham, co-author of *Together Again: A Creative Guide to Successful Multigenerational Living*. “What’s happening right now is that the 50-year nuclear family experiment is ending.”

Not everyone is moving back home. Some never left. Dan, a 25-year-old healthcare consultant, lives with his parents on the northeast side of Philadelphia. While going to college, he stayed at home, and after graduating, Dan gave independence some thought, then decided to stick around. “When I move out, I’d like to be able to make a down payment on a decent place, not some hole in the wall,” Dan says. “The best way to save money is to spend wisely, and right now that means living at home.”

Whatever the circumstances, being an adult in your parents’ home is different from being a teen there. Before Gentle moved in with her parents this past January, the family sat down in the living room and discussed expectations, including chores, financial responsibilities, and how long she would stay. This phase of basically resetting her GPS could have

turned into an ugly high school flashback. Instead, having new structure  
in her life was soothing. “After all the stress of being laid off and losing  
40 my house, it was very comforting to be with my family,” Gentle says. “I’m  
used to being very self-sufficient and independent, but it was nice to take  
a deep breath for a moment and get back on my feet.”

Gentle has found a job and plans to move out again soon, but author  
Graham sees multi-gen living as the wave of the future. “The boomerang  
45 kids’ experience is spring training for the long season of baby boomer  
retirement,” he says. “They’re learning how to live together. That’s vital,  
because in the next 10 years, boomers will start moving in with their  
children.”

He’s undoubtedly correct, but the trend of the elderly parents  
50 rejoining their children has already begun. When Hurricane Irene raked  
the Eastern Seaboard this past summer, 79-year-old Lois Bechtel grew  
uneasy as the winds increased and the rain pounded her Stamford,  
Connecticut, home. Instead of weathering the storm alone, she dashed a  
few steps into the adjoining house to be with her daughter’s family, safe  
55 and secure. “If I lived on my own, I’d be by myself in storms or other  
emergencies,” Bechtel says. “Now I know that if I get sick, they’re close  
by. It’s a comfort.” Bechtel lives in an attached apartment that allows her  
privacy when she wishes. According to a 2010 Coldwell Banker trend  
survey, home builders are on the multi-gen bandwagon, increasingly  
60 incorporating in-law apartments and adding other features for extended  
family members, such as separate entries, multiple kitchens, and second  
master bedrooms.

So, if we’re all going to share, will we be able to get along? It may  
surprise you that not only is the answer an emphatic yes, but the multi-  
65 gen household may yield unexpected benefits, from sharing chores and  
childcare to the more abstract but equally vital opportunity to really get to  
know one’s cultural history. In fact, according to Graham, the nuclear  
family concept wasn’t ever that terrific in the first place: “We’re not  
designed to live that way. We’re designed to thrive in extended family  
70 units,” he says.

**Source:**

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**Annotations:**

- 1 Thomas Wolfe author of the novel *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940); the phrase "you can't go home again" means that once you've left your old life, you can't return to it
- 2 boomers baby boomers, *here*: people born between 1946 and 19