



Tough love: Help your grown child get a job

Parents need to make clear that gravy train is approaching end of line

By Eve Tahmincioglu

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Is there a twentysomething unemployed kid lying on your couch?

If so, you're not alone. Quite a few parents write me about their struggling adult children, many who are fresh out of college, who just can't get on the right career path, or any path at all.

Many found the professions they had hoped to break into weren't easy to break into. Others haven't quite figured out what it is they want to do, biding their time in the rooms they grew up in waiting for the career fairy to show them a sign.

Nicholas Aretakis, author of "No More Ramen: The 20-Something's Real World Survival Guide," notes that 14 percent of all U.S. families had at least one adult child in their household in 2005, a big increase from 3 percent in 1970. And last year the jobless rate among 20- to 24-year-olds was 8.2 percent, more than double what the rate was among the 25-plus crowd, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"Hands on" parents who are more likely to say they are "good friends" with their sons and daughters, Aretakis says, are willing to help with the job search and give their older children room and board in hopes of providing them with all of life's advantages.

Unfortunately, sometimes moms and dads enable Junior's lack of success.

"As long as parents are supporting these kids there will be no real drive to get out of the house," says Mindy Bingham, author of "Career Choices, Things Will Be Different for My Daughter."

The key, she says, is an "expectation of self-sufficiency." Parents should be having that conversation with kids starting at age 13 and 14, that they will be expected to take care of themselves and hold down a job when they become adults. But for older children now is a time for remediation, she advises. Give them an adult reality check — the gravy train is coming to an end.

Bingham suggests having adult kids contribute to the home by paying rent and covering all their own bills. That, she says, often puts the fire under young adults to find a career and move on.

Another parent faux pas — becoming a career buttinsky.

"I've heard of instances where parents were calling employers on their child's behalf and asking why they didn't get the job or where they've called to negotiate salaries," says Stephen Seaward, director of career development at Saint Joseph College in West Hartford, Conn. "Meanwhile, the employer is thinking, 'Can this student handle himself if they have to have someone do this for them? How will I ever be able to use this person to interact with customers?'"

So the bottom line is, you have to strike a balance when helping your children find their career bliss. Advice, guidance, a shoulder to cry on. These are all acceptable. But this is their cross to bear, and if they don't take on the career burden they may end up on your couch at age 30.

Here are some of your letters:

I'm a very frustrated mother. My son graduated last May with his master's in microbiology from a Tennessee state college. He worked for the school two years while working on his masters. He did a semester internship while getting his B.S. in biology and graduated with an overall GPA of 3.7. He has sent out many resumes on the Internet and has only had one interview in the state of Iowa.

Many of the businesses want experience, yet no one is willing to give him a job. What do I do to help him? As a parent that has always taken care of her children, and tried to guide them in the right direction, things just don't seem to be going so well. All he wants is a job, to use the degrees that he has earned after going to school. What can I do to help him? Who can I contact to help him? Any advice you can give would be greatly appreciated.

– A Very Concerned Mom from Tennessee

A lot of the questions you're asking include the word "I". Unfortunately, you can't get your son a job. It's all up to him from now on; and you're not a failure as a mom because he doesn't have a gig yet.

Obviously, parents who have friends or relatives in the industry their children want to break into can open the door to those resources, but even in this case, the child has to be the one that calls these contacts and makes the connection.

I have often stated in my column that the key to finding a job is networking, not sending out resumes into the abyss that can often be web-based job boards.

Your son should go back to the college where he got his degree, and exhaust all the resources the career office there can offer. Also, he should start calling alumni from the school that have gone into his chosen career, says career counselor Anna Ivey. There is nothing wrong with making cold calls or sending e-mails to these individuals and find out if they know of jobs available or can hook them up with others in the industry.

And what about the organization where he did his internship? Are there jobs available there, or can they connect him with other firms who are looking to hire?

Thinking small can also help. If he wants a job in microbiology he should apply to smaller firms, possibly start ups that might give him an opportunity to learn. The pay may not be as good but it will get him the valuable experience he needs.

My 20-year son desires to have a career in the music business. He obtained an associates degree in recording arts from a very reputable school. In order to do that, we had to take out about \$50,000 of student loans, which my son is trying to pay back.

As anyone can imagine, getting a start in the music industry is not easy. We live in southwest Florida and my son specializes in rap/hip hop. There is not much opportunity here for him even though he has diverse skills: He makes beats, writes lyrics, produces for other artists and is a performing artist himself. We've been told that talent doesn't really matter – it's whom you know.

My son is Joe Lopez aka Psycho Joe. (Yes, I am serious.) When he was interviewed once, the interviewer asked him where the Psycho came from and he said it was because he was "crazy on the mic."

Any suggestions for a young man (who is hard-working and talented) that doesn't have a clear direction of how to get where he wants to be?

– Yvette Surita-Lopez, Fort Myers, Fla.

OK Yvette, you sound like a sweetheart and very open-minded. Not every parent would be helping a son who wants to be called Psycho Joe find his dream job in music.

But Psycho needs to bring some of that psycho energy into his job search. Hanging out in Fort Myers, Fla., is not going to get him into the music world. This rap/hip hop dude needs to get his butt to Los Angeles, or if he's too scared to go all the way across country, he should at least take a bus to Miami. Where's the scene? Where are the jobs? He needs to do his research and figure that out.

If he's really committed to music, says Bingham, he'll take a job as an errand boy or answering phones for a record label or other music company to help him get his foot in the door. Sometimes you have to pay some dues in order to make it, and the entertainment industry is notorious for that.

If he's having trouble taking that first step, she suggests you pay for a career counselor if he doesn't have the cash to pay for it himself.

There may be other opportunities in music he's not thinking about. There may be jobs to write music or come up with beats for Web development firms that create web sites for companies.

But a career counselor, or some cash to help him for a few months when he makes his trek to L.A. or elsewhere, should be the extent of your career help.

"She really needs to let him be an adult," Bingham advises.

And let's say he goes out and falls flat on his face and is back on your doorsteps four months later. Then, it's time to have a different conversation with your son, Bingham adds. "We all have dreams, but maybe the music industry is not for you. Let's look at what your other options are out there to meet other passions."

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