

## **New Perspectives About “Failure to Launch” Young Adults**

By [Robert Fischer, MD](#) and [Anne LaRiviere](#), Co-founders of [OPI Living](#) Programs

“It’s never too late,” I said to frustrated parents in my office at the Optimum Performance Institute.

“You seem to think the game is over but that’s not true! Sometimes it takes a village of caring professionals and peers to help break the cycle of alienation and isolation but your son CAN become independent and find his place in the world.”

They weren’t buying it. They handed me an article about “Failure to Launch” kids where a well known physician was quoted saying he is skeptical of programs that claim to help young adults become independent. Instead, according to the article, the solution is to “catch them when they are young, find a school with programs that engage them and limit their access to video games.”

Our experiences at the [Optimum Performance Institute](#) and specialized [Roanne Program](#) have proved otherwise. As the central nervous system and its psychological manifestations continue to be understood we can now acknowledge that this system has greater plasticity and dynamic interaction with the world than previously thought. We have repetitively demonstrated that young adults are responsive to interventions that permit continued identity growth.

### **Recognizing the Issue**

As far back as 2005, Time Magazine “announced” that more and more young people are finding it difficult to achieve independence. On the cover they called them “Twixters,” who, “live off their parents, bounce from job to job...they’re not lazy, they just won’t grow up.”

From 2007 to 2010, the number of adult children living with their parents across this country increased by 1.2 million. Experts give reasons ranging from a shortage of opportunities in the job market and rising demand for education to hyper-attentive parenting. They either “Fail to Launch” (as in the sitcom “\$#! My Dad Says,” featuring William Shatner as the father of a 20+ man who can’t make it on his own), or they are called “boomerang kids” who leave home only to come back after college (like the young man depicted on the cover of The New Yorker Magazine, hanging his Ph.D. up in his boyhood bedroom while unhappy parents watch from the doorway).

“But there IS hope,” I insisted to the parents sitting in my office. They left, saying they will consider sending their son to OPI and left me to wonder:

### **WHAT ARE PSYCHOLOGICAL ATTRACTORS TO REMAINING HOME?**

To sleep all day and hit the computer all night with intermittent raids to the refrigerator, to experiment with job after job and find multiple excuses not to move forward?

Perhaps the biggest one is **safety**, from the perspectives of both the parents as well as the young adult.

At home, the young adult has a predictable routine and peer group (even if it may not be the best influence). But venturing out brings up questions of what it takes to meet friends or what must be done to be considered cool and acceptable.

Moving out can produce overwhelming stress and anxiety, particularly for those young adults who remain attached to magical, early childhood beliefs that everything in life will work out as long as they have parental love and protection.

Parental love is *essential* but insufficient to complete the developmental tasks young adults face, of navigating the complexities of responsible decision-making in an imperfect world.

Many times young adults tell me the thing they miss most about home is their pets, referring to that special bond and predictability of unconditional love that we *all* crave and seek out.

Parents have their own fears: Will he/she be able to function independently, persevere at tasks, interact socially and perform academically on their own? Who will get them out of bed? Who will make sure the homework gets done? Why wouldn't they stay on the computer forever?

Underlying all of this is a **lack of dynamic boundaries within the family**, the "semi-permeable membrane" that must exist between parents and young adults in order for the family to explore independence in realistic and skillful ways, where some issues are absolute, others are negotiable, where closeness exists as well as separation when appropriate.

Dynamic boundaries provide a basis for teaching the ability to set priorities and become comfortable living in the "grey" where we all learn to deal with the complexities and ambiguities of life.

Dynamic Boundaries help parents understand the theory of D.W. Winnicott, MD (1896-1971) called "good enough mothering." It helps them understand why, when Barbara Ray wrote her book "Not Quite Adults" and researched through years of parenting advice books, she discovered that recommended parenting techniques actually "re-cycle" over the years: "coddle your child" "don't coddle," "regimes are essential" "let your child explore on his own," "follow science" "follow your gut."

There is no *absolute* answer. Or rather, the answer is a dynamic one.

A balance needs to be created that works for each family. Approaches toward different children in the same family may even need to be varied so there is always a balance between limit setting and nurturing, providing a safety net and pushing them out of the nest.

#### **ANOTHER ATTRACTOR FOR REMAINING HOME IS PROLONGED DEPENDENCY.**

Unfortunately, many Young adults today need extended financial support and remain financially dependent into their mid-to-late 20's. However, being emotionally dependent is more complex. In order to break away the young adult must be able to **establish INTERNAL dynamic boundaries** that help him/her distinguish between fantasy and reality so he/she can ask the ultimate questions:

### **Who am I? Who do I really like? What do I really enjoy? Who am I doing this for?**

Questions such as, “can I go to that competitive school and still maintain the balanced life I need to in order to stay motivated and persevere (i.e. will I be able to nurture myself and find support beyond my family), or would it be more realistic for me to start at a community college?”

“How do I develop a sense of self based on REAL LIFE ACCOMPLISHMENTS and not just on the belief that because I come from a loving and/or powerful family everything will be OK?”

In fact, “required homework” for discovering the true self and your “place in the world” is **discovering a balance between external goals, internal creativity and joy that can be shared with others.**

### **WHAT ARE PSYCHOLOGICAL ATTRACTORS TO LEAVING HOME?**

The real question is: What is motivating a young adult to move on? Is he/she running away from something (perceived fears of parental control, limitations of high school or inner self doubt) or running toward something (excitement about the unknown, intimacy with the creative self and the world).

Energy that drives the first type of motivation is negative, fear-based and evokes an internal sense of depletion. Energy driving the second type of motivation is positive and full of joy, evoking a sense of creative renewal and regeneration.

Running away reinforces the perspective of avoidance. Time and psychological energy is spent struggling with parents and looking back instead of figuring out the answer to the question, “what do I really want?” The young adult is unable to be present to realistically plan for the future. This attitude reinforces an attachment to the past. There is no room for the excitement that comes from knowing there are many possibilities for change and that many bridges of engagement can be built with others and the world.

Psychological attractors for leaving home are often a combination of the two but the objective is to achieve dynamic boundaries that allow young adults to utilize all the necessary support available to him/her so they can set realistic and attainable goals that propel them forward.

Sometimes the family needs a respite as well as additional support by utilizing services from a program like one of our [OPI Living programs](#) where young adults learn to be responsible for their own mistakes and grow from them, learn skillful ways to communicate and deal with anxiety, live in a place where they no longer are isolated but instead live and participate as part of a village where their parents and family are welcome.