

Under one roof

Multiple-generation households are on the rise — and some like the arrangement



Ray Spataro shares a sweet moment with grandson Aidan, who will be moving in soon with the rest of his family. Aidan's mom, Danielle Mershon, is at right.



In the Kubo-Spataro household in Fountain Valley, making dinner is a communal affair. Susie Kubo, center, gets help from Danielle Mershon, left, and Dani Spataro.

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Living with one's adult children and grandchildren is becoming increasingly popular as the number of households containing multiple generations rises.

In fact, the number of multigenerational homes in the U.S. has grown 60% since 1990 to 6 million, said Sharon Graham Niederhaus, the author, along with her brother, John L. Graham, of "Together Again: A Creative Guide to Successful Multigenerational Living" (M. Evans and Co., 2007).

The days when people left their parents behind for jobs across the country are waning, according to Niederhaus. "It's a national trend for families to reconnect. We're coming back to what was."

"What was" started in prehistoric days when it was common practice for three or four generations to share a dwelling for protection and survival and to share resources, said Graham. Families began splitting up and moving into separate homes after World War II when people moved from rural and urban areas into newly created suburbs to be closer to jobs.

The reasons people return to shared living arrangements are varied, said Niederhaus. They include the death of a spouse, rising healthcare needs and costs, falling pension funds and longevity.

As baby boomers age, the number of multigenerational households is expected to increase, said An-gela Mohan, a Ventura marriage and family therapist.

Many seniors have not saved enough for retirement and the cost of living will make a private place unaffordable for them, she said. The high cost of housing, especially in Southern California, has also made it difficult for seniors and people starting out to afford a home. Graham, a professor in the Paul Merage Business School at UC Irvine, predicts the nation's foreclosure crisis could also contribute to increased multigenerational cohabitation in the near future. The economic challenges faced by many could easily result in a major rearrangement of family life in America that will include adult children moving in with parents and bringing their families with them, he said.

There are cultural reasons why families live together, but in many cases, it is usually for financial purposes, Mohan added. "Families will band together until they can branch out on their own."

But some, like the Spataro and Kubo family of Fountain Valley, make a multigenerational household a permanent arrangement.

Twelve years ago, Susie Kubo's husband died and she didn't want to live alone. So one of her four children, daughter Tami Spataro and her husband, Ray, decided to sell their home and move with their two children into Kubo's five-bedroom Fountain Valley home. The two houses were only five miles apart, but the consolidation made a huge difference in everyone's lives.

Over the past few years they have upgraded Kubo's house, putting in new flooring, painting, redoing the kitchen and adding a bathroom.

The family has made the arrangement work. The Spataros pay the mortgage; Kubo pays the utilities. Six years ago Kubo agreed to allow the Spataros to purchase half the house. She had resisted out of concern that she would have nothing to leave to her other children. The Spataros needed the tax write-off owning a home provides. "We went to an attorney and were able to figure it all out so that everything was fair," Tami Spataro said.

There were some challenges in the beginning, mostly when it came to matters involving raising the children, admitted Ray Spataro, 49, an inventory specialist for a plumbing supply business. But now, the relationship with his mother-in-law is smooth.

“We worked it out,” he said. “She’s been there for us and we’re there for her.”

The arrangement has many benefits. Tami Spataro left a full-time job to return to nursing school and now works part-time. Kubo cooks and her son-in-law does the laundry.

“I don’t have to do a whole lot,” Tami Spataro, 50, said. “It’s brought us closer together. Wherever my husband and I go, my mom goes with us. It’s a given.”

Kubo, 72, said the benefit for her is that she has enjoyed watching her grandchildren grow up. The wild parties they had as teenagers didn’t bother her. She stayed in her room.

“I’d rather have them here than out somewhere else,” Kubo said. “We probably wouldn’t have seen each other as much.”

The benefits for kids

For her granddaughter, Dani Spataro, now 22 and a cosmetologist, the first year was tough. She had to change schools and didn’t know anybody. But because her grandmother drove her to school, they became close.

Her brother, Tyson Spataro, 24, who works in construction, will be moving back in, too, along with Danielle Mershon and their baby, Aidan Spataro, adding a fourth generation to the mix. “They want to save money to buy their own house, and it’s the only way they can afford to save enough,” Tami Spataro said.

“Living together has brought us all closer,” she added. “We all get along great.”

Some families create a unique living situation for that social benefit of being together.

Every week, Joseph Dunlap, 87, spends time in two homes. Part of the week he lives in the Seal Beach home he shared with his wife of 56 years until her death. Every week, he makes the one-hour drive north to Oak Park where he lives from Sunday to Thursday with his daughter, Julie John, 48, her husband Kevin, 47, and their two sons, Aidan, 6, and Alex, 9. Dunlap has his own room in the house.

“Shortly after my mom died, my dad realized it was really quiet,” Julie John said. “It’s not like he was ever used to being by himself.”

When in Seal Beach, Dunlap participates in a lawn bowling club, but other than that says he is not social. “My wife was the one who took care of that. I don’t know a lot of people,” Dunlap said. “I know that my daughter and her family have their own schedules, but I enjoy coming up here and being with them.”

Kevin John was the one who suggested having his father-in-law move into their large two-story home. Kevin John's own father had passed away 23 years earlier and he understood the loneliness of the spouse left behind.

There have been many benefits to the arrangement. The boys, for instance, look forward to Grandpa's weekly visit and have learned to help him in small ways, such as by getting his things out of the car to welcome him.

For dinnertime, the family has devised a game to encourage conversation at a time of day when everyone is tired. Each person may ask three questions. Enough conversation is usually generated from the first few questions.

"Aidan asked Grandpa what his favorite movie was. Grandpa came up with 'The Godfather' and the kids asked what that was. They had never heard of it so that was a whole discussion," Julie John said.

Dunlap is no longer a guest, his daughter said. He is now responsible for Wednesday-night dinners when she and the kids come home late after karate class. Dunlap also helps clean up the kitchen, emptying the dishwasher. "It's a benefit for me and him. Everybody likes to contribute and to feel needed," Julie John said.

Although the Spataro family of Fountain Valley and the John family of Oak Park have enjoyed the intimate pleasures of a larger family, sometimes a new member coming into the house can create stress, Mohan said.

The challenges

Space issues can cause conflict. For example, if a teenager has to give up her room for a grandparent, there can be resentment. Holidays can be trying when older people have certain traditions that younger generations reject.

"Even things as simple as mashed potatoes can create a major war. Grandma likes to use butter and sour cream, but everyone else wants a healthier version," Mohan said.

It can be difficult for an elderly parent, who was once in charge, to now be reliant on the child and to feel like a burden; or to want to give advice, especially on child-rearing, and not have it well-received.

"Within the same family, there can be so many different values and ideas of how to raise children. When you have different generations living under one roof, sometimes the boundaries get a little crossed," Mohan said. "There has to be dialogue and respect."

If those adjustments are made, families living in multigenerational households can enjoy many benefits - stronger relationships, financial savings, child- and elder-care support and less loneliness, said Graham.

“We will all need to rely more on the strengths of family ties and remember the fundamental human characteristic of interdependence,” he said. “Human beings are social animals and are, by our deepest nature, interdependent on one another.”

Freelancer Sophia Fischer lives in Oak Park.

Appeared in LOS ANGELES TIMES 'Living Well' section on Tuesday, June 10, 2008.