

Failure to Launch

Preparing the next generation of adults



By Thurmon Thomas, LAMFT

You've probably heard the term "failure to launch" floating around in recent conversations. The term itself was coined to describe a young adult's lack of readiness or an inability to transition from adolescence to adulthood. The truth is, "failure to launch" is not just an interesting term—it's an epidemic.

Estimates taken from the 2014 census data show that about 21.4 percent of young adults between the ages of 24 and 34 are still living at home with their parents. That's about 10 million Americans in that age group who have essentially "failed to launch." In many cases, we see young adults attempt to leave home for college, religious service, or employment only to return home within a few months because they were unable to adapt to living on their own. In other cases, the child never leaves home at all.

So why are so many young people failing to make the jump from youth to adulthood? There are many factors which may contribute, but in most cases, it boils down to the fact that they simply lack the emotional toughness needed to make it in the real world. Why do they lack the necessary emotional toughness? Most likely because we, as parents, have made life too easy for them.

Let's take "Billy" for example. Billy is 25 years old, lives at home with his parents, has a part-time job, and spends most of his free time in online gaming. Billy's mom makes sure his clothes are washed, dried, and ironed. Billy gets three home-cooked meals per day (thanks mom), but usually eats in his room. Billy's dad works hard to make sure the mortgage is paid and that Billy has health and auto insurance. Billy occasionally helps around the house, but only if he feels like it. He makes some of his car payments, but when he doesn't get enough hours at work dad covers it. Life is pretty good for Billy (other than the fact that he is most likely clinically depressed)—so why on earth would he ever leave home?

Young people who are at risk for launch failure suffer from the following symptoms: low stress tolerance, lack of motivation, no accountability, poor work ethic, narcissism, entitlement, and lack of basic skills (cooking, laundry, balancing a checking account, etc.). Parents can help prevent and eliminate these symptoms in the following ways:

Allow your children to fail. Real life comes with natural consequences which our youth need to become familiar with while they are young. If 16-year-old Billy fails a test because he skips school, then don't seek to rescue him (or his report card) from the consequences that may follow.

Teach them the joy of earning things through hard work. I am a believer that we can have anything we want in life, if we are willing to put in the effort—but the effort is necessary. So, when Billy asks for the latest iPhone, tell him he can certainly have it when he has the money to pay for it himself, then encourage him to follow through and earn it.

Encourage them to persevere when things get hard. When Billy comes home from soccer practice and tells you he wants to quit the team because the coach criticized him, tell him that quitting is not an option. Remember, it's not about Billy being drafted to play professional soccer, it's about teaching Billy to do hard things and seeing things through to the end.

Put them to work around the house. (Laundry, cooking, cleaning, shopping, yard work, repairs, etc.). Running a household is difficult; their first shot at doing it should not be their first day away from home.

Help them develop a vision and long-term goals for the future. Looking forward to the future with a clear plan will help motivate our children toward a successful launch to adulthood.

There are endless opportunities in this world for our children—the dreams may begin in the home, but they only become a reality after our children venture out beyond our doors.

If you need more ideas on preparing your children to transition toward adulthood, or if you have a child who is struggling to successfully launch, seek professional help. A qualified therapist can help guide you and your children toward a better quality of life.



About the Author

Thurmon Thomas is a marriage and family therapist with The St. George and Cedar City Centers for Couples and Families. Thurmon has been in the St. George area since 1983, and currently lives in Washington Fields with his sweetheart of sixteen years and their six beautiful children. Thurmon specializes in working with couples, families, and adolescents.