

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My son Keith, his wife Laura, and their new baby boy have moved in with us. They're young – he's twenty and she just turned eighteen. This was an unexpected pregnancy and both were in college at the time though both dropped out after the baby was born. In spite of this, my son continues to act like he's a single college student. Keith continues to stay out all hours with his friends and still hasn't found a job. Laura is a good mother but doesn't help out with anything but tending to the baby. I'm starting to feel angry and resentful. My husband and I were looking forward to semi-retirement now that Keith was in college. Now I feel responsible for making everyone's dinner, doing more laundry than ever, and always being on call to babysit. Advice?

-- Frustrated Nana

Dear Nana,

Exactly how many babies are living in your house? It sounds as if there are three of them. If Keith and Laura are old enough to be parents, they're old enough to stop acting like teenagers and step up to their new roles as parents. Unexpected pregnancies by their very nature catch people unawares and especially with teenagers and young adults they are not often prepared to deal with their new responsibilities. Nevertheless, the situation is as it is and you and your husband will not be doing anyone any favors by "over-helping." It's past time for a family meeting to set out some new guidelines.

First let Keith and Laura know that you love them and want to be supportive. In fact, that is the reason you've invited them back into your home. But let them know that being supportive does not include your taking responsibility for making every meal or washing everyone's clothes. Taking care of your grandson so that Keith and Laura can get away for an occasional movie or dinner with friends is a wonderful gift but there is no reason for you (or your husband) to be "on call" for this.

Make it clear that everyone needs to pitch in by taking his/her turn at laundry, dishes, cooking, and cleaning. Set new guidelines about offering to babysit including the kind of notice you need to do so. For example, if you and your husband are planning on an evening out and you're asked to watch you grandson, you must learn to say "No. I have other plans."

Personally, I would also have a discussion about the length of time you expect this living arrangement to last. In my opinion, Keith and Laura should be making plans to move out on their own. Set a deadline. This may require that Keith find a job that is not ideal but simply something to pay the bills until he can find a better job. If this were my son and daughter-in-law, I would advise them make plans to return to college or some other kind of professional training in the future. It may not be possible right now, but it is very difficult – if not impossible – to earn an income sufficient to raise a family in today's economic environment without education or training.

Nana, what you should look for here are ways in which you and your husband can be supportive and loving while at the same time insisting that Keith and Laura take on

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their appropriate responsibilities. Sometimes this is a difficult balance to achieve. But with good communication and firm boundaries about what you will and will not be responsible for, you will find joy in having your family close and get rid of the anger and resentment.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2003 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) All of the “Your Personal Coach” columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.