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Aging adults are now boomerang seniors

Kaiser Health News reported recently on a growing phenomenon, that is, seniors who may be great grandparents but who are among a growing group who have a living parent for whom they provide some care. (<http://khn.org/news/boomerang-seniors-aging-adults-move-to-be-near-mom-or-dad/>). The new reality is that individuals are experiencing longer life expectancies and there is a growing number of “very old” Americans. Seniors are downsizing, and many are moving in to the same senior community as their parents, both to reduce their personal responsibilities and to make it easier to assist with a parent’s care.

Caregiving for the older generation is not the same as when it was first studied according to Amy Horowitz, a professor of social work at Fordham University in New York City. The “sandwich” generation referred to those who were squeezed between aging parents and young children. This type of caregiving is likely still going on but now the adult children often are on the verge of retirement or have retired and must care for their parents, who are likely in their 90’s. The basic question of the sandwich generation remains, that is, how to find balance in your own life, only now it is during your retirement. Kathrin Boerner, an associate professor of gerontology at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, calls it “aging together” and predicts that the parent-child constellation (very old parents and their elderly children) will be more common.

Boerner, in a presentation at the Gerontological Society of America in 2015, noted that “The very old are the fastest-growing segment of the population in most developed countries, with an expected increase of 51% of elders age 80+ between 2010 and 2030.” Additionally, about two-thirds of these very old have advanced-aged children, many of whom serve as the primary caregiver. Boerner reports hearing from 80 year olds that they don’t have a life because they must care for a parent, often while having significant health issues of their own.

“For a lot of people, that [retirement years] is the time—if you’re in good enough health— [that] you hope for a time of greater freedom,” per Boerner. People are often past the time of caregiving tasks, and look forward to caring for themselves, and having the freedom to come and go as they please. But for those with very old parents, this just does not happen. Some retirees give up their homes so that they don’t have that responsibility any longer but wind up moving in with a parent to care for her, or moving into the same retirement community to be close by. It is difficult to achieve balance in life as a result.

Some of the people in the article talk about enjoying their new community while still being able to monitor an aged parent’s care. Hopefully, we will find that balance of caregiving and enjoying retirement for those in the new “sandwich generation.”