

## "Big babies" not always a bad thing

### Opinions vary across cultures regarding adult kids in the home

[Tom Carney](#) / North Shore News

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"All the lonely people, where do they all come from?" - "Eleanor Rigby," The Beatles

I've written numerous columns on retirees and now I am one. My wife continues to work and we have two grown children at home.

"The kids will be gone soon," we tell our friends. They smile and nod knowingly. They have stay-at-home kids as well.

These couch surfers aren't just a North American phenomenon. In Europe nearly half of the adults between 18 and 30 now live with their parents. In Italy, that figure ratchets up to almost 80 per cent. In 2007, the Italian finance minister proposed a tax refund of \$780 a year to help push the *asbamboccioni*, or "big babies," out of the house.

The economy plays a role in these living arrangements but there's more to it than that. Italian parents report that they are happier when living with their adult children. That's not the case here.

A crowded house isn't a problem in Britain. Loneliness is. In fact, in the United Kingdom, the relationship between old age and social isolation is now officially known as chronic loneliness. The health minister, Jeremy Hunt, in a recent speech, referred to this "epidemic of loneliness" as a "national shame."

How bad is it? Roughly 10 per cent of Britons (more than 800,000 in total) are chronically lonely all or most of the time. Five million said that television was their major form of companionship and substance abuse among the elderly is now at record levels.

The lonely have a significantly increased risk of cognitive decline, dementia, depression and even suicide.

Hunt called on Britons to learn from Asian cultures in which there is reverence and respect for older people.

We can learn a lot from how other cultures manage the problems of old age. In Asia, for instance, both public policy and family culture have historically taken filial responsibility and obligation as a given. Parents, children and the community all have the shared expectation that children will care for parents in their old age. There's been speculation that as Asian economies industrialize and expand, young people will move to where the jobs are, leaving their families and community behind.

In other words their culture will become more like ours. I doubt that. Third- and fourth-generation Asian Canadians who are well assimilated into western culture continue to display a far greater level of responsibility and obligation to their extended family members than do most Canadian families. That suggests that the Asian family culture has some real staying power. But how are these comparisons relevant to our culture? Is the social contract found in parts of Asia likely to become the norm here? No. In our culture, most of the time, the elderly are on their own. Given that, perhaps the Italians have it all wrong. Instead of bribing our kids to leave, maybe we should be paying them to stay.

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