

The slouch generation

They're spoilt, they're indulged and they're still living at home

A provocative new book says that 'overparenting' has been a disaster for today's young adults. **Tim Teeman** meets its author

When the American journalist Sally Koslow's son Rory was at school, his class debated corporal punishment. Koslow, then a women's magazine editor, let Rory research it himself. But the father of the boy he was paired with, a lawyer, enlisted staff at his practice to help his son. Rory was judged to be a better debater. Koslow later overheard the other boy's mother, sure that with the expert support he would emerge victorious, say: "How could you have lost to Rory Koslow?"

Far from the "tiger mothers" ruthlessly focused on their children's academic and professional success, Koslow, the author of a new, much talked-about book, recommends "unparenting". Her book, *Slouching Toward Adulthood: Observations from the Not-So-Empty Nest*, doesn't recommend an abdication of parenting duties, but a loosening of the stays modern parents apply to their offspring, whether it's relentless high achievement at school, or the endless ferrying to and from sports, activities and extra tuition. She writes: "The best way for a lot of us to show our love would be to learn to un-mother and un-father... It's one thing to provide our children shelter in a storm and another to function as their entire weather system."

"Benign neglect can have its benefits," Koslow tells me. Her book focuses on the return to the nest of adult children, including her own, and how parents can encourage these indulged slackers to embrace adulthood rather than remain "adultescents" existing "in a perfect storm of overconfidence, a sense of never-ending time and a grim reaper of a job market."

To break the cycle, Koslow says, "mothers and fathers need to step back so kids can step forward. This may require some remedial classes in cooking, car maintenance and housekeeping in order to teach adult children to manage on their own."

Koslow's theory was highlighted, to much debate, in a recent *New Yorker* article. A raft of manuals have been published recently in the US designed to rebalance the mollycoddled generation, with titles such as *The Price of Privilege*, *The Narcissism Epidemic*, *Mean Moms Rule* and *A Nation of Wimps: The High Cost of Invasive Parenting*. Today's parents are not just "helicopter parents", one former school principal tells Hara Estroff Marano, author of *A Nation of Wimps*. "They are a jet-powered turbo attack model."

Koslow lives on New York's Upper West



SIGRID OLSSON / GETTY IMAGES

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Side and sees stressed children and stressed parents all the time. "Overparenting is a natural trend," she says. "It's very tempting for parents to become concierges, especially able women who have had demanding careers and given those up to become full-time parents: it's like an extension of their professional selves to micromanage their children's lives. It may be rooted in the best of intentions, but I think those parents are holding their children back."

Koslow "un-mothered" Jed (now 35, a lawyer) and Rory (29, a film executive). "I was editor-in-chief of a magazine. I didn't have the time to be there [at home]. My children learnt to do things for themselves. In the two-hour gap between him getting home and me, one of my sons learnt to cook." Her children attended "very

competitive" schools: one private, one not. "They were less spoilt than their friends. At the private school, my son's friends' parents would give their children \$200 [£130] for after school: sushi, movies, going to a club. He stopped hanging out with them."

Elisabeth Guthrie, associate clinical professor of psychiatry and paediatrics at Columbia University, says: "Children suffer when they are made the centre of attention. Parents put them through all this extra tuition and activities with the best of intentions. Today, we like to do things quickly, but it takes time for a child to develop. There is no fast-track."

Parents can be "kiddie-whipped", as Guthrie puts it, by spoilt children. She has seen New York parents "giving in to requests for plastic surgery for 16-year-

olds" and children taking medication for "neuro-enhancement", to help score A grades. Un-parenting means "letting kids fall where they may and letting them dust themselves off. It's hard to do, especially when 'parenting' is sold so hard by advertisers. Anxiety sells."

Koslow recalls talking to another mother on the phone. "At her end, her child was demanding attention and she was talking to us both. Instead of saying 'Mummy will be five minutes', she was giving the message that 'You, my child, are more important than anything', that the Universe would bend to the child's will — and, of course, it won't."

Slouching Toward Adulthood: Observations from the Not-So-Empty Nest (Viking); sallykoslow.com

Teenage slackers: hands-on parenting has done them no favours

They live at home, we pay for their holidays: does that make us bad parents?

By Maureen Rice

When I was 16, I chose to stay at school for A levels, something definitely optional at the end of the Seventies. As all of my siblings had left school at 16 and found jobs, my parents agreed to support me, provided I bought my own uniform and paid my bus fares to school, which seemed fair enough and comfortably doable with money from my weekend job. At 18, I celebrated the end of school by running off to France for six months with my two best friends, where we hitchhiked, slept on beaches, sold doughnuts in our bikinis and kept in touch by sending monthly postcards home saying: "Working as an au pair with a strict family, and hardly allowed out at all." Our parents were fine with that.

By the time I was 19, I had moved out of my parents' house and would never live there again. I went from hall of residence to shared rented flat; and though I'd visit regularly, I never stayed overnight and it wouldn't have occurred to me to rock up with a bag of washing. Nor did I ever take money or advice from my parents again. Thanks to a full grant, summer temp jobs and an uncrushable confidence in my own superior judgment, I was financially and emotionally independent from then on. My parents were fine with that too.

Fast forward to now, when I have two grown-up kids of my own. I say grown-up mainly in the legal sense — Fred is 19 and Kat is 22 — because by all my own measures of adulthood they are still children, and their relationships with their parents couldn't be more different than mine. At 16, Kat had never had a job, and neither she nor I expected her to get one. Her focus was to be her school work, because of course she'd be going to university. At 18, she celebrated the end of school by going on her first independent holiday with her two best friends, to

Barcelona, for a week, paid for by us. She sent texts to let us know that she'd arrived safely, what the hotel was like, and at what time we could collect her when her return flight landed. When she went to university, we paid her fees and her rent so that she wouldn't have to work during term time.

Last year, she graduated and moved back home, just as her brother was leaving for university, and we started paying his fees and rent too. After stints of unpaid interning, she was lucky enough to land a job at a decent graduate salary. A "decent graduate salary" means enough — just — to afford rent in a shared flat, in at least some parts of London, but it also means that you will spend most of your nights at home and never be able to save a penny. Encouraged by us, she has decided that living at home is a better choice for now. We don't charge rent, so she can save hard for a deposit for a place of her own — though not so hard that she can't have holidays or a social life.

All the things that we didn't want for ourselves, even if our parents would have allowed them, which they wouldn't, we encourage and enable in our own kids. She has her own room, decorated to her own design, paid for by us, and where we knock before we enter. We keep the fridge stocked with food she likes, paid for by us. If she wants to have friends over, we clear out of the kitchen so she can entertain them in peace. If she needs a lift and it's late or bad weather, her dad still drives her. She cooks for the family once a week, if she's in, and helps me work the remote control. A couple of nights a week she may stay at a friend's or at her boyfriend's, and all we ask is that she lets us know when she'll be back. Is she a princess? Are we mugs? Is there something wrong with this picture?

If we are mugs, we're not alone. According to Mintel, the market research company, more than three million young adults aged 20-plus returned home last year. For many, it's to clear debts or because rent is unaffordable. But for others, it's a more complicated mix of finding life easier and nicer at home than in an overpriced shared flat. And this, says Sally Koslow, author of *Slouching Toward Adulthood*, is bad. She thinks we've wrapped our kids in cotton wool, failed to teach them life skills, and denied them the satisfaction of achieving independence. We've effectively forgotten what parenting means.

It's a neat argument, but it's the wrong argument, because it belongs in a different world — the less complex world that boomer parents grew

up in. In 1969, the voting age was lowered from 21 to 18, and overnight 18 became the new age of legal adulthood, an arbitrary label that nonetheless shifted our perceptions of when independence and the markers of adult life began. In fact, sophisticated brain imaging shows that our brains — particularly in the areas related to forward planning and impulse control — aren't fully developed until around the age of 24. But at least premature adulthood was less of a problem and more easily attainable in those days. I had my first Saturday job at 13, and in my gap year I could walk out of one job on a Friday afternoon and into another one by Tuesday morning. Those jobs were mainly in retail, admin and customer service, the kind of job Kat couldn't get, because when I was a teenager most of the mothers were still at home with their kids, not queuing up for the same jobs — 66 per cent of mothers now work, compared with 31 per cent in 1980, and that's before we even consider the recession. After college, competition for graduate jobs was tame — there were just 68,000 graduates in the UK in 1980, compared with nearly 300,000 last year. Mortgages were about three times the average salary; they're more than seven times now.

Today, much more is expected from our kids and it's harder to attain, with more years in education before they can afford independence, yet we still expect them to want the same things, and to achieve them when we did, even though it's practically impossible. Terri Apter, the British psychologist and author of *The Myth of Maturity*, describes the period of the early twenties as "apprentice adulthood", a phase in which our kids need reliable but gradually needing support, and says that we should not expect them to emerge fully formed as adults when they reach a particular birthday. "The myth of maturity at 18 is pervasive but damaging" she says, and parents who think that "tough love" means kicking them out before they're ready, are usually

wrong. "Adolescents who make the transition most successfully and creatively to adulthood are those who still have the support of their parents. Not just financially, but in terms of ongoing engagement, understanding and advice."

It's not just economics that keeps our kids at home. When I was growing up, the world was divided into Adult World and Kid World, and the two rarely overlapped. So long as I obeyed my parents' (many) rules, they weren't particularly interested in my friends or what music I liked. We've been much more engaged with our children's lives, and as interested in their emotional and personal development as in their grades at school. Yes, there are extremes of "child-centred" parenting that are both ridiculous and disturbing, but overall, family relationships are richer as a result, and we aren't in as much of a hurry to change them. I don't think of where we live as "my house", as my parents did, but as "our home".

Now that Kat and Fred are older, knowing when to step back and when to step in is a whole new choreography, and I often get it wrong. Both kids are mess magnets, and I've had to get tough with them about chores. In turn, they could do without me making "mum" conversation with their friends, and though they appreciate their luck, both would prefer their own places. Fred in particular says it is "embarrassing" to admit to your friends that you live with your parents. We're all compromising.

I know that in another year or two they'll be gone. Maybe they'll bounce back again, as so many of my friends' kids have done. Fine by me. I'd have made braver decisions if I'd felt able to do the same thing at their age. One friend with three big sons despairs of them living at home, but as she has made herself their slave — skivvying for them as if they were still ten — I think she only has herself to blame. Kat's best friend is also at home with her family, who are from South America. She doesn't understand why this is even an issue — families living with or near each other more or less for ever is normal in her culture, and everyone benefits. The cult of independence and individuality that my generation lived by has its dark side, in increasingly atomised, selfish and lonely lives. Do we really believe that we're only responsible to and for ourselves? One of the hardest lessons for us to learn has been mutuality — the back and forth of support and shared resources of every kind, throughout a lifetime. If we're lucky, isn't that what families are meant to be for?



Maureen Rice

How to raise independent teenagers