

How parents' resources shape their children's attitudes to the future

November 1 2018, by Emily Rainsford



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Everyone's family background has affected them, for better or worse. In the UK today, it is difficult for young people to get a good job, and this means that families are having to provide more support for young people. In [a recent survey](#) of 3,000 18- to 35-year-olds in the UK, my colleagues and I found that 38% of these young people still live with

their parents, and 47% had "boomeranged" back into the family home after living independently.

While much research [shows](#) that [family matters](#) for the progression and success of younger generations, it's less clear how it matters for their employment pathways and attitudes towards their future. This is a question our [ongoing research](#) is addressing, through a series of interviews with three generations of people across ten families in the northeast of England.

Our analysis is showing that there is both a difference between young people's achievement of economic self-sufficiency, and their ambition to become self-sufficient – and that this depends on their [family background](#) and the behaviour of their parents. Based on these findings, we've divided the young people from our ten families into four different groups.

The first group are the "entrepreneurs" – 28-year-old Chris (all names have been changed to protect the anonymity of those interviewed) and 24-year-old Victoria, are the most economically independent from their parents. Both are self-employed, have moved out of the family home and started their own families. One is married, the other has a young daughter. They have both relied very little on their family to [support](#) them, primarily because there wasn't much support available.

In contrast to the entrepreneurs are the "voluntary dependents," Rosa and Philip, aged 20, and Andrew, aged 28. This group relies a lot on their parents, who with their middle-class background are able to support their children financially. They are primarily still in [education](#) and although career choice is an important issue in their lives, they focus more on creative working or avoiding boredom in their job, rather than a high salary.

The "gradual progressors" have achieved some economic independence from their parents. Two of them, John, 20, and Helen, 22, are employed, while Peter and Lucie, aged 20 and 26 respectively, work for their family's business. However, they still rely on their parents for support. Whether that's moving back into the family home, or help setting up a [family business](#), the parents are willing and able to economically support their children.

The last group, the "ambitious," are the opposite. Jack, aged 28, is unemployed, while Nick, aged 22, is at university. Neither of them have become economically independent of their parents, but they are the most ambitious to become so. While their families are also middle-class and able to support their children, young people such as Jack and Nick may accept some help but are determined to pay their parents back. They are very driven and strategic in their education and employment choices.

The value of education

All of the families we're following value education, but for different reasons. In the "voluntary dependant" families, education has a value in and of itself. It's the experience of going to university and learning new things that both the parents and children see as an asset to their character which enables a fulfilling career. Rosa, from the voluntary dependent group, told us: "I'd like to graduate. Yeah, that's my main priority where I am. And then I don't know, I want to ... find a job that I actually want to do ... that would be worth my time ... but I don't even know where to start thinking about it."

These values had clearly been passed on from one generation to another. Rosa's father told us: "I think going to university is a good experience in itself and it also gives you opportunities, if you decide the opportunities aren't ... you don't want them then that's fine, but at least you've got them."

In contrast, those [young people](#) from the "ambitious" group see education as a means to an end and closely linked to getting a job. Their parents have clearly passed on this attitude about education to their children. For example, Nick and his mother displayed a similar attitude regarding his educational choices, focusing on their utility rather than their intrinsic value.

Transmission of capital

All the parents in our study wanted to help their children with money, but their ability to do so varied. The parents of our young "entrepreneurs" had comparatively less money, and so less available to pass on. In the families of the "gradual progressors" and the "ambitious," there was some money available but this wasn't always passed on to children in cash. Instead, parents invited their children back to live in the family home or helped them by creating a position in the family business.

Those parents who can give their children extensive support are able to do so largely due to the extensive capital that they've been able to accumulate as a consequence of their upward social mobility. Our analysis also shows that [parents](#) pass on values, which equip their [children](#) for certain paths in life, such as further education or working in the [family](#) business.

What we see is an even stronger accumulation of capital and resources within certain families than had been shown by [previous research](#). If the UK doesn't address this issue, even greater inequalities may develop between the haves and the have nots.

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