

All together now: why multigenerational living is making a comeback

More adults are housing both their parents and their children — all under one roof! Check out the pluses and minuses of having your entire family share close quarters — and smart moves that can make this potentially thorny situation run smoothly — from a pro who has been there.



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Key takeaways

- As people live longer and redefine retirement, multigenerational households are on the rise.
- Design aspects of a multigenerational home are important —especially if one of its residents is in poor physical or mental health.
- Issues around shared spaces in a home should be discussed and agreed upon going into a multigenerational living arrangement.

If the term “multigenerational living” conjures images of the Waltons in your mind (“Goodnight Grandma,” “Goodnight, John-Boy!”), you’re not alone.

But guess what? Increasingly, more middle-class and well-to-do families are choosing to come together in one house (or two adjoining homes) and live their daily lives together — for reasons that don’t involve financial necessity.

So says Lisa Cini, founder of Mosaic Design Studio (a leading provider of design services for senior living) and the author of Hive: **The Simple Guide to Multigenerational Living**. Cini learned firsthand about making multigenerational living work: currently, her home consists of herself, her husband and their two children, her mother and father, and her 96-year-old grandmother (who suffers from Alzheimer’s). Oh, and the family dog.

She recently shared with us her thoughts about the pros and cons of having your kids and your parents share close quarters — and smart moves that can make this potentially thorny situation run smoothly.

Why multigenerational living?

Cini points to several reasons why more families — including those with significant assets — are opting for multigenerational living.

Longevity. People are living longer — which means older generations have more time, more energy and more desire to spend time with grandchildren. On the flip side, longevity also means more time for illnesses and medical conditions to take hold. Boomers with parents suffering from Alzheimer’s or other cognitive/neurological ailments may want to have their folks nearby so they can check on them and ensure their safety.

Changing views of retirement. Once seen as a time to golf for a few years, retirement is increasingly viewed as a life stage in which to connect with family and maintain ties. Says Cini: “more aging grandparents want to be around their grandkids to help teach them and leave them a family values legacy. Many parents want that for their kids, too. And many families are deciding the best way to achieve that is to have family members be closely involved in each other’s lives.”

Comfort. For seniors with health issues, living in nursing homes or the like may be unappealing. “The elderly no longer want to be in a foreign environment, with strangers. They want to be around people they feel comfortable with and don’t have to put their makeup on around — that’s actually a big deal for elderly women,” notes Cini. “In a senior living facility, you might feel you have to always be on show.”

Under your roof — or under a nearby roof?

When examining multigenerational living options, a big question early on is whether to bring everyone together under the same roof — or to set Grandma and Grandpa up in a nearby separate space (like a carriage house or an in-law apartment).

Health is often the deciding factor here. Are the aging parents not healthy enough to look after the grandkids? Do they suffer from depression that could impact the mental health of the entire family if they were to live under one roof?

If so, a “granny pad” next door to the main house might make the most sense. Such structures have their own entrances but can also be connected to the main house via a causeway — giving families unique living areas with an easy way to get to each other quickly.

But if the aging family member can handle it — and if the main residence is large enough — all the family members might consider living under one roof. Cini says families that go this route often applaud how the elders impart important information and values to the youngest members. “Kids learn from grandparents that there’s a long game — that life has ups and downs, and small problems don’t mean the world is over,” says Cini. “They also learn patience — grandparents might take a while to do something or even get in the car, for example — and the empathy that comes with it.”

Designing with LOVE

A big part of making multigenerational living work well for all involved is to design (or redesign, as the case may be) the rooms in a home. This is especially true if there’s going to be an aged parent or grandparent with major health issues living with you. But smart design can pay dividends across the board to all family members.

Cini has developed an approach to multigenerational design she calls the LOVE Method:

1. **Light.** Cini recommends bringing in natural light and nature views as much as possible, noting that natural light cycles can help people sleep better. Natural light also helps early-stage Alzheimer’s/dementia sufferers more easily recognize the difference between breakfast and dinner and the appropriate time to go to bed. Additionally, get rid of the blue lights in a bedroom — alarm clocks, tablets, TVs — that actually keep you awake and mess up your natural sleep rhythms. Amber lights are better.
2. **Optimize.** An easy example of how to optimize is combining multiple features into one item to save on space, cost and function. In a bathroom, for example, consider a light, heat lamp and fan fixture combo. Or a combo grab bar-toilet paper holder. Or even a shower curtain instead of a glass door for the tub — which can allow for greater and easier mobility. Another way to optimize space: push a bed up against the wall. A bonus of such an arrangement is enabling the person to develop his or her muscle memory of where and how to get out of bed in a new room — thereby reducing the risk of falls. “When there’s only one way to do something, it can actually increase the feeling of comfort and independence. That’s true for a child, and it can be true for older family members you have living with you,” says Cini.
3. **Visual.** Setting up each room or space so that it has one or two clear purposes can prevent confusion among older family members (especially if they’re experiencing cognitive challenges like dementia). As Cini puts it: “if you’re dealing with people who are already confused, don’t confuse them further by the interior design.” Along those lines, families might want to create visual cues of where things are in a space — using colorful hand towels that stand out from a white bathroom wall, or painting the last step on a flight of stairs a different color from the rest.

4. **Ease.** Adding space around doorways and at landings can help with mobility and overall comfort. Making it easier to move in and out of rooms can also help elderly family members interact with the entire family throughout the house. Sensors and automation are other ways to make movement easier. Example: light sensors that turn on lights when people enter rooms as well as lights along stairway and hallway moldings — which can truly “light the way” in and out of rooms at night.

Other key considerations

All that said, there’s more to successful multigenerational living than smart design — as Cini herself can attest to.

One major challenge she faced was the dynamics around shared spaces — dining rooms, living rooms and so on. Seemingly innocuous items like seasonal decorations and specific flatware can be big deals because of the sentimental value certain family members place on them — which means you have to figure out which items need to be integrated into family spaces and which ones need to go.

Cini elaborates: “older women, especially, can feel very defined by their china plates, or the collection of nutcrackers they display every holiday season. For them, those items may have long been reflections of how good a housekeeper or wife they are, and you probably can’t jettison those things just because you don’t like them. They need to be honored and they need a place in a multigenerational home.”

Important: that doesn’t mean Mom or Dad (or Grandma or Grandpa) has to get their way in every instance. Negotiation and compromise are key here — the old family Bible might get the nod for a place in the living room, while the ugly flower painting from Grandma’s old living room might need to be stored away in the basement or put in her bedroom.

Another issue that Cini didn’t foresee going into this process: who “owns” shared spaces at various times. This might require scheduling agreements — for example, grandparents will spend time in their part of the house when the kids’ soccer team comes over after a game. Conversely, Grandma gets control of the television in the family room every Wednesday night. “Older generations often assume kids must defer to their wishes when they enter a room, so setting terms around who can do what in a space and when they can do it will help offset resentments,” says Cini.

Conclusion

Clearly, the decision whether to make your home a multigenerational one involves a massive number of moving parts. As with any strong partnership, great communication, space to recharge alone and flexibility are keys to having a successful multigenerational home.

Ideally this overview gives you and your family a starting point for a discussion about whether to move forward — and, if so, how to set up your entire clan for success.

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