

Growing pains ... and gains

Consider more than just universal-design techniques when the discussion of moving an elderly parent begins. Address the emotional implications, as well as the necessary day-to-day adjustments



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It's the stuff of nightmares for every child of an elderly parent – the phone call in the middle of the night or the middle of your work day: “Your father fell. Your mother's just not quite right. We think there's something wrong.”

And suddenly, there you are, with a

parent who needs a new home – possibly yours. Now you've got to find a way to reconcile your home and lifestyle with your parent's growing needs in a very short period of time.

Although it may not feel like it at the time, you are not alone. According to a 2008 AARP study, almost 3 million U.S. households include a household-er with a parent or with a parent and a

child. And with the over-85 age group now the country's fastest growing population segment, and a generation of baby boomers just hitting retirement, that number is sure to grow.

A number of decisions face both adult children and their parents once everyone realizes independent living is no longer a good option for the parent. What can the parent bring with them from their current residence, and what simply will not fit in the child's already furnished home is one of the more emotional questions. But the most important point to figure out involves determining the physical changes that are necessary to make in the child's home to meet the parent's medical needs.

“You need to know what the functional level is of your parents,” says Elinor Ginzler, director of livable communities with AARP and co-author, with Hugh Delehanty, of “Caring for Your Parents: The Complete Family Guide” (Sterling, April 2008). “How do they do with walking and taking care of their own daily needs?”

If your parent is coming into your home directly from a hospital or rehab center, you'll be able to get a lot of this information directly from the physical or occupational therapists who have been working with your elder. Describe to these professionals what your house is like and where in the home you intend your parent to sleep, along with how you and your family generally live your lives. If immediate medical issues aren't an issue, Ginzler also suggests contacting your local council on aging, another valuable resource for learning about social services available in your area.

“That office provides information and referrals,” she says. “They may be able to offer this kind of assistance themselves, and they will be able to network with those providers that are

caring for your parent.” The first places in your home any physical or occupational therapist is going to check likely will be the bathroom, because it poses the greatest risk for an elder and is central to daily-living tasks. Grab bars in the shower or bathtub can provide both easier access and a support aid while bathing, according to Jon Pynoos, gerontology professor at the Andrus Gerontology Center of the University of Southern California and co-director of the Fall Prevention Center of Excellence. Additionally, bath mats should have a non-slip backing and tubs should be slip resistant.

Pynoos also suggests looking into ways to add glare-free lighting to ensure enough illumination for older eyes. For example, adding nightlights across a long bathroom-vanity counter or changing out a bathroom vent-fan for a unit that also includes a low-wattage nightlight could make your home significantly safer at night for a small amount of money.

Some safety-improving changes involve removing existing items, rather than adding new ones. First off, clear pathways are more important to older folks who may have trouble maneuvering around small hallway tables or chairs – especially if your parent needs a cane or walker for balance. Ginzler and Pynoos both suggest removing decorative throw rugs, if possible, because they can create a dangerous tripping hazard.

One benefit, though, for homeowners seeking to accommodate their older parents' needs is that larger elderly populations – and a greater awareness of good design – have led to safety-improving products that are much more attractive than their institutional forbears. The growing popularity of “universal design,” a philosophy dedicated to creating



Image courtesy of AARP

Coming home to nest: A winner in AARP's recent Recession Remodel contest, this Richfield, N.C., home balances functionality and family, with time to relax on the front porch.

products and spaces accessible to a broad range of ages and abilities, means that the form of such offerings is becoming as important as their function.

“Some people are resistant to changing their house, because they don’t want it to look like a nursing home or hospital – the good thing is, they don’t have to,” Pynoos says. “You can make things look like they fit into the home much more easily today than you used to.”

For longer-term planning, which might involve larger budgets but will address more significant needs than grab-bar and nightlight installations will, you also can turn to an increasing number of building professionals trained in the principles of universal design. For example, the AARP has teamed up with the National Association of Home Builders to offer a training program resulting in the designation “Certified Aging in Place

Specialist.” Such plans might include options like wider halls and doorways, or sinks with openings beneath them, to better accommodate wheelchairs.

Of course, the emotional question of the furniture and other items that can and cannot come with your parent cannot be ignored. Each side in this arrangement needs to give a little in these negotiations, Ginzler says, including the adult children. As Pynoos notes, such flexibility could improve the ability of a parent to adjust to a major life change.

“When people have their own belongings, it can make them less anxious – and it’s something they can share with other people in the family,” he says, noting the process also offers some positive potential.

“Sometimes their dining room table might be nicer than yours, so it’s a win-win situation.”

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