

ITALIAN “STAY AT HOME” CHILDREN: ATTITUDES AND CONSTRAINTS

by

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An unusual characteristic of Italian young people is the fact that they continue living at home with their parents for so long, affected by that which Livi Bacci (1998) has called the “postponement syndrome”. The average age at leaving home has increased in most Western countries but the levels reached in Italy are amongst the highest in northern European countries and the United States. Italian young people always seem to adopt “adult” behaviour later on, for example as regards finishing their studies, leaving home, settling down and starting a family. All these factors have a significant influence on demographic processes, causing a postponement of the stages of adult life.

In fact, important demographic events such as marriage and the birth of the first child occur in the ages after the 30th birthday. Mean age at marriage for women in Italy has risen from 24.4 years in 1984 to over 28 years today while that of the birth of the first child has increased to over 28 years.

Various hypotheses have been advanced to explain why Italian young people are staying on longer in the parental home. The reasons may be of a structural nature (higher youth unemployment, more time spent in education and the lack of available housing) or a cultural kind. In the years immediately following the discovery of the “longer family”, studies carried out in Italy have generally privileged the former, mainly because for years economic difficulties (and consequently the problem of youth unemployment and the lack of housing) were the most macroscopic aspect of socio-economic change. After this, more detailed analyses were carried out, partly because it was realised that the relationship between continuing to live at home and starting work were less important than had previously been thought.

To understand why young Italians do not leave home, a multidimensional approach was used in a study conducted by IRP-CNR (Institute for Population Research of the National Research Council). In-depth research was done on the relationship between delayed home leaving, the conditions of family life and the advantages and disadvantages perceived by children and parents when a child leaves home. An examination of these aspects together with the structural constraints can, in our opinion, paint a more interesting picture – albeit a more complex one – of the Italian situation and help us to understand more fully this phenomenon of prolonged parent/child cohabitation.

The study included a series of qualitative and quantitative research stages. In 1998, we conducted a quantitative telephone survey, using the C.A.T.I. system, using a sample of 4,500 young people aged between 20 and 34 who were still living at home. The survey was supported by a qualitative analysis of the phenomenon based on four focus group discussions with young people in the same age group (20-34) still living at home, conducted in four cities differing in terms of geographical location, cultural context and size in relation to the behaviour patterns of the young people being studied. The cities chosen were Rome, Brindisi, Naples and Treviso.

In addition, given the importance of extending the field of observation, a second, quantitative survey using the same method was conducted with 1,000 parents of the children interviewed in the first survey in order to pinpoint any possible “blame” attributable to the parents as regards their children not leaving home and to look at their motivations, expectations and in general their experience as parents in the context of family life. In this case as well, the quantitative telephone survey was supported by qualitative analyses using the focus group technique. Two such groups met in Rome, one with fathers and the other with mothers.

In this paper we will examine some of the results emerging from the surveys¹. First, we will present some of the data about Italian young people in terms of education, work and staying on at home (Section 1). The survey data will then be used to describe the profile of the Italian nest leaver (Section 2) and to understand the living conditions of young Italians in the parental home (Section

¹ This paper takes up some of the reflections and analyses carried out by the IRP research group which conducted the research. For further information on this see Bonifazi et al., 1999; Palomba, Schinaia, 1999; and Palomba R., 2000.

3). In addition to this, we will try to highlight the advantages and disadvantages of leaving home by looking at the replies given by children and their parents (Section 4). Lastly, we will give an overview of the research data, before drawing our conclusions (Section 5). Besides looking at these aspects, we will try to show how the reason for continuing to live at home or for leaving is influenced by variables such as gender, the family's characteristics, work and family type.

1. Background information

We will now give some data on Italian young people to give a statistical picture and a quantitative framework to the phenomenon of postponed home leaving.

1.1 Education

The postponement of home leaving is also linked to the longer period of time spent in education. Over half of the young generations has a qualification higher than that of the middle school certificate as against one-third of the preceding generations. Today 52% of young people aged between 25 and 34 years has a high school diploma or a degree as against 33.6% of the population aged 35 to 64 years.

The enrolment rate and the length of time spent in education has been increasing in Italy for more than 30 years. The Italian trend is in line - even if at a lower level (Graph 1a)- with that of the other European countries and there are two important features. The first regards the equality of educational achievement between men and women. The gap between the two sexes was first bridged and now women have even overtaken men: women with a high school diploma account for 45% as against 41% of men, and 10% of women aged between 25 and 34 years have a degree as against 8.5% of men. This educational supremacy of women has been seen both in quantitative and qualitative terms: women perform better educationally than their male counterparts.

The second feature regards educational fall-out, which is very marked both at high school and university level. As regards university education, despite the fact that Italy has one of the highest enrolment rates in Europe for the first year, very few young people actually complete their studies: one first-year student in four does not go on to enrol for the second year. The result is a proportion of university graduates in the population aged 25-34 years amongst the lowest in Europe: in 1996 the figure was 12% as against 16% in Belgium and Germany and 20% in the Netherlands (Graph 1b).

1.2 Employment

More time spent in education has delayed the entry of young people into the workforce. Today the majority of young Italians do not begin work before the age of 18. The prospect of work and problems related to unemployment begin to take form around the age of 20. The position of young Italians as regards the labour market has not only changed as a result of longer enrolment, but also because of a series of transformations in the world of work which has produced a greater demand for atypical kinds of job (part-time, fixed term contracts) often at the cost of standard forms of work (full-time, open-ended contracts). This process has in particular affected the young who, besides being in a weaker position in the labour market anyway, are very often working in temporary jobs with fixed term contracts or part-time. Furthermore, it is at this stage of life that the turn-over is highest (ISTAT, 2000). In any case, a family's efforts to encourage the children to study more puts young people in a better position as regards work: the higher the educational level, the more job opportunities there are.

1.3 The stay at home children

Studies on young people living at home are usually part of research on the transition from adolescence to adulthood. These studies have unequivocally shown how the entire western world has been affected by a sliding forwards of the stages which precede access to adult life (finishing studies, finding a job, leaving home, settling down, having a child). Although this path is common to all countries, each one has its own specific aspects: the particular feature of Italy has been evident since the start of the last decade (Cavalli and Galland, 1996). The profile of the Italian adult forms part of a “Mediterranean” typology, quite distinct from northern Europeans and is characterised by young people who tend: 1) to study for longer, even if they are not particularly able scholars; 2) to take longer to find a stable job; 3) to continue living at home even when economic stability has been achieved; 4) to marry very soon after leaving home and not to try out any non-traditional kind of living arrangement (Graph 2).

The trend for young Italians to continue living at home for longer has become more marked over the years². Between 1987 and 1997 the percentage of young people aged between 20 and 34 years living at home increased from 43% to 54% (Table 1). There was in fact an increase in all age groups: in 1987 76% of young men and women aged 20-24 were classed as “children” while this figure rose to 88% in 1997; in the next age group, the role of “child” was still prevalent and applied to just over 6 out of 10 people. There is only a significant drop in the number of adults still in the nest once the 30th birthday has been passed (23% of men aged 30-34 were still living at home), but this was nevertheless the age group in which there had been the biggest increase. The percentage of young people still living at home is high for both sexes and any differences are basically due to the difference in age at marriage³.

We also note that one of characteristic traits of Italy is that forms of living arrangement other than marriage are not very common: in the vast majority of cases, people leave home only when they get married. In 1998, the decision to live alone was made by only 6% of men and 4% of women aged 25-34 years, sharing accommodation with friends or colleagues was chosen by 1.4% of men and 1.2% of women, living with a partner without getting married was a less common choice involving only 57.5 thousand of the under-35s.

1.3.1. Employed but still in the nest

Focusing attention on young people in work, we see the same trend to continue living at home: in 1987 37% of workers aged 20-34 were living at home, a figure which rose to 45% ten years later. The largest increase is seen for both sexes in the 30-34 years group for which the indicator increased from 14% to 24% for males and from 9% to 18% for females (Table 1).

We might have expected those with jobs to be less likely to continue living at home and this would have supported the theory that young people live at home for longer because of difficulties in finding work. But as we have seen, living at home for longer is very common even amongst those with a job.

So one of the characteristic traits of the behaviour of young Italians is continuing to live at home even after economic independence has been achieved. Evidently variables other than employment combine to determine the processes of home-leaving. Some variables which come into play when we want to give a full interpretation of the reasons for young Italians staying in the nest are: an unfavourable housing market; the unsuitable kind of policies for young people; relationships which are not yet “mature” enough for a couple to decide to live together; the desire to maintain the

² According to the study by Billari e Ongaro (1988), the average age at leaving home has increased from 22.8 years for the cohort of those born in the years 1946-1950 to more than 25 for the 1966-1970 cohort.

³ In 1996 average age at first marriage was 27.1 for spinsters and 29.9 years for bachelors.

standard of living that they enjoy today in the parental home; and the nature of the parent/child relationship. An examination of some of the data gathered for the IRP study⁴ will allow us to throw light on some of these aspects and increase our knowledge of the subject.

2. The nest leavers: a profile

According to the IRP survey, not many young Italians intend to leave home in the short term. The question dealing with the intention to leave home in the next 12 months received an affirmative reply from only 15% of the sample, 8% was undecided but the remaining 77% had not yet envisaged making a move.

In order to understand which variables are most closely associated with propensity to move out, we applied a classification technique using the “Answer Trees” method⁵. Two types of variable come into play in this model: an “objective” variable and several “predictive” variables. In our case, for the objective variable we chose the question on intention to leave home and as predictors we selected some structural variables (age, educational qualification, and occupation), some variables dealing with opinions (advantages and disadvantages of leaving home for the children themselves and the parents) and others to do with information about any previous experiences living away from home and on the existence of any relationships as part of a couple.

Figure 1 gives the results of the analysis. Starting with the objective question, “Do you intend to leave home in the next 12 months?”, the first variable that comes into play in the model, determining the main subdivision between those who intend to move out and those who think they will continue to live at home, is age. This first large subdivision is therefore between the youngest who are less keen to move out and the oldest who are more willing to contemplate a move.

On the right of the tree we can pinpoint those variables which, together with age, are more closely linked to leaving home and we can then draw up a profile of the nest leavers: the percentage of those who think they will move out in the next 12 months rises to 21% amongst the 25-34 year olds, reaching 26.5% if they are involved in a serious and stable relationship with a partner and 29% when the respondents can see some advantages in moving out. In this way, the model identifies the “standard path” for young Italians’ passage to adulthood: young people who are already “grown up” whose plans for leaving home are closely linked to forming a lasting relationship as part of couple.

The second determinant variable indicated by the model is education: the percentage of those intending to leave home rises (26%) amongst those with higher qualifications (degree, doctorate and specialisation). The second model for Italian nest leavers therefore seems to be linked with the achievement of high social capital, which can foster a less traditional view of family life and also to a greater propensity to move out and enjoy the benefits of having studied successfully.

The characteristics of the young people who are less keen on leaving home can be found on the left-hand side of the tree. They are the 20-24 year-olds who in 83% of cases have no intention of leaving home in the short term. Amongst these, there are two distinct profiles: the “stay-at-homes” i.e. those with the lowest propensity to move out, the majority of whom are students and young

⁴ The study carried out 1988 on a sample of 4,500 investigated the following aspects: 1) degree of independence and autonomy of young people as regards the family of origin and family living conditions; 2) choices concerning living with one’s parents and leaving home: motivational aspects; 3) young people’s propensity to mobility; and 4) information about the respondents and their families. The study carried out on a sample of 1 000 parents looked in more depth at the following aspects: 1) considerations on the phenomenon of young people continuing to live at home; 2) the conditions of cohabitation; 3) parents’ attitudes to their children leaving home; and 4) information about the respondents.

⁵We used the Chi-Squared Automatic Interaction Detector (CHAID) method which uses the chi-square statistics to identify the best divisions (Kass, 1980). The statistical model selects the best predictive variable to form the first branch of the tree and then repeats the branching process until there is a variable that produces a statistically significant subdivision.

women who do not intend to work, and the “explorers” i.e. young people who have lived away from home and who are more likely to move out, perhaps because they have already experienced the advantages of living independently from their parents.

To sum up, for Italy, the best predictor - the variable most closely linked to home leaving - is a higher age, followed by the existence of a stable relationship and higher educational qualifications. Amongst the younger ones, the desire to leave home is very weak and is only reinforced by a previous experience of living independently. Lastly, those least willing to leave home are the 20-24 year-olds who have never lived away from home and who are currently students or young women who do not want to work. The tree that emerged supports the theory that in Italy the achievement of economic independence resulting from stable employment does not necessarily imply that young people will leave home, as we have seen employment only comes into play at the roots of the tree and in the “stay at home” profile.

3. Family living conditions

One way to start investigating the quality of the child/parent relationship is by looking at how young people live in their homes - if they participate in the organisation of family life, if parents impose certain restrictions on them and when. This information is an indispensable starting point in order to understand how children experience life with their parents.

3.1 Social life

Young people who are still in the nest enjoy a lot of freedom in the home: most of them have their own bedrooms (72%), may invite friends round (71%) and organise parties and have others to dinner, even without telling their parents first (56%) (Graph 3 and 4). As regards these aspects, the group of respondents is fairly similar, with the exception of those who live in big families who are more restricted in managing life in the home.

Nevertheless, freedom in their parents' house is noticeably reduced for all young people as regards being alone with their girl/boyfriend. In this case, only 48% of respondents feels completely free, 9% must ask first and 43% are denied this possibility. There is also a significant difference between the treatment of sons and daughters. Daughters are much more limited and supervised by their parents than sons, in particular in the South. Those with the most freedom are the ones living with a single parent and only children (Graph 5).

Lastly, there do not seem to be any restrictions on places and persons to be frequented: more than 9 out of 10 respondents said there were no limitations whatsoever.

3.2 Helping around the house

15% of young people state that they do not participate at all in the organisation of family life and this is already a significant initial clue concerning the level of involvement in domestic management on the part of young people who are still living in the parental home. These young people seem to be still lovingly taken care of by their parents and especially by their mothers. 1 in 6 does not help with even the simplest and most essential jobs around the house nor with more personal ones such as making one's own bed or tidying one's bedroom. Children with housewives as mothers, living in big cities, aged 25-34 years, and particularly those with jobs and males, are those given the fewest responsibilities regarding daily household chores and they tend to be waited on “hand and foot” by their mothers (Graph 6).

The biggest contribution is to be found with house cleaning (41%), shopping (40%), cooking (26%) and 3 out of 10 help with more personal duties (like cleaning their own rooms and making

their own beds). Nevertheless, a significant gender difference emerges as regards help around the house. Daughters do more - only 7% do not help at all as against 23% of males aged 25+ years.

The employment situation of the respondents also influenced participation in household activities: young people with jobs, both men and women, are less likely than their unemployed counterparts to tidy their own rooms, clean the house and prepare meals (Table 2).

3.3. Money of one's own

Do Italian children contribute in any way to household expenses? 41% of them do not contribute anything at all, but if we consider only those with a regular work contract and monthly salary, we can see that 1 in 3 regularly pays a fixed amount to his/her parents and only 1 in 5 does not give any financial help. Children who are living with a single parent are the ones most likely to contribute (a fixed amount in 48% of cases).

This fairly comforting picture is somewhat undermined if we look at the type of contribution made. Those who make a contribution do so by covering personal expenses whilst few contribute to more general expenses such as bills or daily shopping (Graph 7). There are no noticeable differences amongst young people as regards this aspect which shows that "paying your way at home" is not particularly common amongst Italians⁶. From the survey of the parents of the children interviewed, it emerged furthermore that the parents themselves are the ones who don't want "money from the children", since this might indicate they wanted their children to stay at home for purely economic reasons.

3.4 Only one house rule: being on time for meals

In such an advantageous family atmosphere for young people, it is hardly surprising that only 1 respondent in 3 feels constrained by the fact of living at home.

Having to come in for meals on time, which is simply a mark of respect for the person who prepares them and a very understandable house rule, seems to be one of the (few) problems noted by some young people who see this as a big limitation of their movements. This is a very common situation not only because it is a rule indicated by many of the young people who stated that there were limitations to living at home, but also because all the other perceived limitations were much less important (Graph 8). Clearly eating together and coming in on time for dinner is one of the very few rules "imposed" by parents and one which must therefore be respected. Apart from this, other limitations mentioned were: strictness of parents' outlook, not being able to talk at length on the phone, having to inform one's parents before sleeping away from home, and having to tidy up after themselves.

There are some differences in the perception of the various limitations of family life. Once again, young people with jobs are the ones for whom individual limitations are less important and they are the group for which life at home seems to be the least problematic.

3.5. Freedom with few responsibilities

To sum up, living at home for young people seems to be a very comfortable proposition. They enjoy numerous advantages and can have many experiences which are less frowned on by today's society: they can travel, go away on holiday, see friends and boy/girlfriends - in and out of the house - spend their holidays with them and often also other times which used to be dedicated to the family (Christmas, Easter, etc.). Every desire seems to be satisfied without any particular responsibilities. The rules imposed by the family on young people do not seem very burdensome - except for having

⁶ The same results are reached by Cavalli & De Lillo (1993, p.213), ISTAT, 2000.

to come home for meals, a rule which can partly be avoided if advance warning is given of a later arrival.

Young people are also looked after handsomely: most of them have their expenses covered by their parents who tend to satisfy them without any major limitations while they have no responsibilities as regards the running of the home. The family seems therefore to be a useful (and possibly willing) ally in the longer and longer stage of preparing for life on one's own, relieving young people of many responsibilities and worries and allowing them to concentrate on their jobs, their professional training and to have an active social life.

There were no big differences between young people's ways of life: the living conditions of young people living with their parents appears to be very similar for all of them and living at home with one's parents seems to be more an element of aggregation, of being part of one's own generation rather than representing a marginalised situation that could be criticised.

In this positive picture, there are few exceptions but amongst these the most important affects the young women who, especially in the South, have to deal with a more closed attitude to sexuality and are required to do more housework. Young people from big families seem to more limited in their use of the house and more tied to family rules. Younger children are more subject to constraints and limitations imposed by their parents. After the age of 25, children are seen as "adults" and living at home carries fewer obligations in terms of coming in on time and participation in family activities. Lastly, children who have already started work seem to have even fewer constraints than the others and are undoubtedly perfectly happy with their situation as a "stay at home" child: they hardly participate at all in family activities, are unlikely to contribute to the family budget and they have a great deal of freedom of movement. They do however cover their own personal expenses.

Having said that, it is therefore logical and perfectly natural that in Italy young people who continue to live at home are happy to adapt to a comfortable, reassuring situation with no responsibilities: they live and grow up in a malleable environment that adapts itself to the needs of the young person, attenuating any kind of criticism and conflict, making it objectively difficult and indeed almost unreasonable to leave home. Where could young people find better conditions than those they already enjoy at home with their parents?

4. A difficult choice: the pros and cons of leaving home

One part of the survey dealt with the advantages and disadvantages of leaving home. Parents and children were asked to identify the costs and benefits, motivations and conditions for closing the door of the parental home behind them. The results - as we shall see - were very useful to help us understand the behaviour of the two protagonists, children and parents, of this prolonged cohabitation in Italy.

4.1 Advantages

In the eyes of the young people interviewed, what were the theoretical advantages of leaving home? There was a preference for idealised aspects such as the possibility of becoming free and independent and also of enjoying greater privacy, but almost 1 in 5 could not see - even in theory - any possible improvement, obviously considering the present situation of cohabitation as satisfactory (Table 4).

Only at the lower end of the list of preferences do we find some more practical and positive aspects of life on one's own: the acquisition of a greater sense of responsibility, the possibility of managing one's own time and space and having new experiences. However, not many felt that the desire to leave home could be seen as practice for taking on responsibilities. The fact of having a stable job does not contribute to the birth of a desire for independence as one might expect, given that the employed are amongst those who give no importance to this need.

From the point of view of the parents, the list of advantages for their children is headed by greater freedom and independence⁷, followed by practical aspects. The greater sense of responsibility and the importance of having new experiences are emphasised more by the parents than the children especially the younger and the better educated ones, perhaps partly because they are thinking about what they would have liked for themselves in their youth.

17% of the young people questioned and 23% of the parents see no advantages in a child leaving home. Amongst the children, the ones who see no advantage in moving out are above all the older males and in general those with jobs (22%); for them the present situation is the best one possible either because of greater freedom at home or because of the fact that they find living with the parents an excellent situation.

The parents were also asked what advantages they themselves would benefit from when their children left home. The replies are in some cases obvious, given the fact that young people do not help much around the house and the benefits are therefore connected to a reduction in workload, financial savings, and more available space in the house. Very few parents mention greater privacy (5%) and more free time (7%). The most surprising aspect is that more than half states that they will gain no advantage from a child leaving home (Table 4) and in particular this is the case for single parents and those with low educational qualifications.

4.2 Disadvantages

We will now look at the other side of the coin, the disadvantages for children and for parents. The economic problems deriving from independence are those which cause the most concern on the part of both parents and children, and close behind come problems to do with the practical management of a house: housework, cooking and ironing, keeping the place clean and tidy - services which are taken care of in the parental home and seldom carried out personally (Table 5).

But then for both groups worries of a completely different nature emerge that have to do with the area of family relationships, with the support and solidarity given and received within the family. The fear of loneliness, having to face up to more responsibilities, the loss of emotional support following the move are all negative aspects for the young people interviewed and their parents are also concerned about these. Above all, it is the women who seem to be more vulnerable in the face of the idea of leaving home, both the younger and the older ones, all those who have an unstable or undefined job situation (students, temporary workers, and the jobless) and the women from the South, where evidently warm and protective relationships have a privileged role within the family.

From the parents' point of view, a child leaving home means losing a close relationship (50%), which causes loneliness and sadness (34%) and is in general a cause for further worry (24%, Table 6). Mothers and single parents are the ones who more frequently mention loneliness (37% and 45% respectively). They also emphasise the loss of moral support and help (respectively 16% and 12% as against 6% and 5% of all parents).

Lastly, the loss of control over the child (6%) is a source of further anxiety as well. The umbilical cord that ties a child to its parents is not cut when the child leaves home. What do children expect of their families when they go to live on their own? Above all, moral support is required by half of them (51%) and advice (27%), but financial help is also mentioned if it should be necessary (36%). Therefore the emotional ties between children and adults within the Italian family are very strong and this is also confirmed by the requests for psychological support from the family even when a child has left home.

⁷ In general, the replies of the parents paint the same picture as that of their children, even if with different levels which are influenced by the greater number of replies given by the young people to the questions on the advantages and disadvantages which were of the multiresponse type.

4.3 I'll leave home if... Children and parents dictate "impossible" conditions

The identification of the requirements necessary for life on one's own shows unequivocally that both parents and children want the moment of leaving home to be "completely secure". The security of a stable job becomes the indispensable condition for the big step for the majority of young people and half of parents (Table 7). This requirement is particularly pressing for those who haven't as yet found a job and for the younger ones, who seem to have more difficulty in finding one. Nonetheless, this is an attitude which is also shared to a certain extent by those who are working.

The need for a reasonable income is very widespread and also in this case it is an essential requirement, especially for males. But what do young people mean by "reasonable income"? We asked for more details about this and about half of the respondents indicated a figure of between 450-750\$, one in five would be content with less (from 750 to 1000\$), and about 25% wanted more than 1250\$. As we said, there is a tendency to impose conditions which are very difficult to achieve; it would be almost impossible to reach such a high threshold, and so this income requirement would seem to indicate a justification for staying on at home.

The third widely shared and popular condition among young people is marriage. Here the traditional model reappears: passage from one family to another without any intermediate steps.

Accommodation is the other big problem. It is a problem felt by all respondents, seen as more pressing by those with jobs perhaps because having resolved the employment problem and achieved economic independence, their attention is focused on the other big obstacle to moving out.

The desire not to lose any of the advantages enjoyed by living at home is very important for 1 in 5 respondents. In this case, the ones who are better off at home are the most concerned about this (young males, graduates and students).

For children, marriage is in third place after a job and a reasonable income while parents put it first (58%), followed by a job (49%), a reasonable monthly income (26%) and suitable housing (23%). The better educated parents place more emphasis on housing, work, income and maintaining the present standard of living, whilst the mothers who do not work and single parents give more importance to marriage.

To sum up, our respondents impose such difficult conditions for leaving home that they make this option almost impractical. If on the one hand they seem to be open to the idea of moving out, on the other they seem to cunningly count on all those elements of real life that could justify them staying on at home. In effect, for young people the idea of moving away from home and their parents is perceived as an obstacle that daily gets more and more difficult to get past. The more difficult this obstacle becomes the more they appreciate and re-evaluate their situation at home, which therefore seems more idyllic and reassuring. It is therefore not surprising that only 1 in 7 of the young people questioned has plans to move out in the immediate future and the vast majority rules it out categorically.

The parents are knowing allies and their very "silence" on the subject and their tolerance in the face of a situation which even if pleasing is always and in any case hard for them both economically and physically, bears witness to a difficulty in accepting the idea that their children will leave the nest.

One other aspect indicated by the parents should also be noted - that of their children's poor ability to manage alone the many little tasks of life. There is a presumed "ineptness" of the children, even if they are adults, to whose training the parents themselves have contributed.

5. The "postponement syndrome": a combination of tradition and objective difficulties

The conclusion of the period of education/training, having a place in the labour market, and the availability of housing are generally the indispensable requirements for life on one's own (Sgritta,

1999). There are countries where young people reach these objectives sooner and more easily, others where it is more difficult and it is no coincidence that in Italy, where support for young people is not very generous, the postponement syndrome is so marked. The rigidity of the Italian labour market, the precarious nature of employment with the openly stated need for a greater spread of atypical jobs may also have played an important role and disoriented young people who, more unsure of themselves, have raised the “price” and placed increasingly burdensome conditions on leaving home (Pellizzari, 1999).

Nor should we ignore the role of the media, which has very effectively created and diffused the values of consumerism, wealth and success. And these values, strongly transmitted by means of advertising and the media in general, have presented models which are often unreachable and frustrating and which certainly do not help young people to acquire a sense of their own mental and emotional strengths. The difficulties of Italian politics and the country’s economic and employment problems are also often emphasised and denounced by the media which could have generated and encouraged a widespread pessimism among young people, an attitude of distrust towards the institutions and the state, a feeling that the family and one’s parents are the only trustworthy support one can count on, strengthening family ties and at the same time making young people more uncertain and fearful in the face of life choices and the taking on of responsibilities and independence (Palomba, 2000).

Without wishing to play down the importance of the objective difficulties of entry into adult life that young Italians have to face every day, in this paper we have shown some other factors that have influenced the phenomenon of the “stay-at-home children”, studying some aspects at micro (family) level. Our aim is not to pinpoint the weights of the various factors contributing to this lengthening period of remaining at home, rather the results of our research seem to show clearly that within the family there are some elements which push in the same direction as that indicated by the purely structural factors: the slowing down of the process of leaving home.

In general, it emerged that parents as well as their children are aware of the particularly Italian tendency for young people to prolong their stay in the parental home and they explain the phenomenon in terms of the difficulties encountered by their offspring in finding a place to live and a job and also more generally the problems inherent in society. Parents are however also aware of their active role: young people are coddled and spoiled, they are given no responsibilities and they do not have parents who direct them towards independence. Living together in the family makes children feel at ease and reassures the parents who enjoy living with their children once they are adults and find this situation quite normal. These are the results to emerge from our survey and they have also been confirmed very clearly by the focus groups. According to our research, parents play the role of the useful (and possibly willing) ally in the longer and longer stage of preparing for life on one’s own, relieving young people of many responsibilities and concrete problems and allowing them to concentrate on their jobs, their professional training and to have an active social life.

5.1 Conclusive remarks

Now we will summarise the subjects dealt with in this paper in an attempt to show that some aspects are entrenched in the particular character of the Italian family. There are some commonly held attitudes in our culture which are different from those in other European countries and which must be taken into consideration if we want to study in more depth the anomalous situation of the Italian family in a European context.

We have found some aspects which are even more strongly anchored in tradition: the lack of development of a “single” way of life, “over-coddling”, the protection offered by the family, the desire for certain guarantees in order to leave home without running any risks and the emphasis placed on the parental role. These are all aspects which show the importance and the role of the family in Italy and which provide an answer - a family one - to the structural difficulties encountered

by young people which have led them to “emancipate themselves within the family rather than to emancipate themselves from the family” (Cavalli, De Lillo 1993, p. 212).

Two elements have emerged that indicate a change in family characteristics, i.e. a change in the parent/child relationship and an attenuation in gender differences due to the female entrance in the labour force. We start with the latter.

- *A change in the parent/child relationship*

In the wake of the changes in the Italian family it should certainly be recalled - and this is one of the most disruptive elements of change - that there is now a different relationship between parents and children. Research done on families in the 1950s identified strong conflicts due to the children's need to differentiate themselves from their parents, with the parents strongly grasping the reins of command and family authority. In the years to follow, under the influence of greater rebelliousness on the part of the young who were very critical of traditions, amongst which the family was by no means the lowest on the list, the hierarchical set-up of the Italian family began to be eroded. The family then began to evolve uninterruptedly and parents became more aware of young people's rights whilst the latter became more willing to accept what their parents had to say (Piccone Stella, p.161). And today, differently from the past, the process of freeing oneself from parental control does not presuppose and require actually leaving home but occurs, calmly and in agreement, while staying with one's parents. Solidarity within the family group increases, there is discussion, negotiation and each individual contracts his/her own independence. In a recent European survey, amongst the reasons for not leaving home 34% of young Italians stated that “these days, parents don't impose such strict rules on young people at home as they used to” as against 26% of the Dutch and 14% of the Swedes (DG XXII, 1997).

- *Gender differences are attenuating when the children work*

Young men and women continue to socialise in a different way as far as household management is concerned, women being more used to joining in traditionally female activities (meal preparation, laundry, and tidying up), and men the male activities (administrative jobs, gardening, and small-scale maintenance). The balance between the sexes in terms of access to education for young Italians does not seem to have led to a break with traditional family roles, rather it is starting work that constitutes the real “break” with the system, rebalancing the gender disparity. For daughters, starting work means a lightening of family duties, while not much changes for sons. Meanwhile they all wait for another change - settling down with a partner - when the rebalancing between the sexes is destined to be renegotiated once again.

- *The “over-coddling” of children in the Italian family*

Besides the lack of conflict, the characteristic that seems to have been particularly emphasised by our respondents is the character of the care that parents provide for their children. The Italian family at the threshold of the 21st century is still a very protective family that doesn't provide care but “over-coddles”.

Our data have produced a picture of a pleasant and tranquil family environment in which the children's most immediate and material desires are satisfied. Young people seem happy to prolong their adolescence without taking on any responsibilities and in this respect they have the support of their parents who do not ask for their active participation in the daily running of the home. These reflections are in line with the results of the EU study where Italians, together with the English, were those most likely to indicate that “it is better to retain domestic comforts without having to face the responsibilities of one's own home” (DG XXII, 1997).

It is therefore perfectly natural and logical that children develop a strong sense of “adapting” to a family situation that cares for them, in which they are served and looked after: living in a context that tries to meet young people’s needs, attenuating as far as possible any kind of hard work or participation makes it objectively difficult and less worthwhile to leave home. The Italian family does not take, it gives: this is especially true for children with jobs for whom mothers and fathers are even less exigent, trying not to add any family duties to the effort and responsibilities required by their children’s job.

- *Leaving home in complete security*

Both the younger and older members of the Italian family (parents and children) cannot accept the idea of taking a “leap in the dark”. This desire for guarantees makes the adventure of the passage to adulthood more difficult, an adventure which, in order to be undertaken, may need a “healthy dose of recklessness and trust which represent the indispensable basis for facing any new experience” (Sgritta, 1999). This seems to express the entirely Italian concept of “wanting the best for one’s children”, which guides the decisions of many Italian parents even at the cost of their own needs⁸. The “spirit of sacrifice” did not emerge - this was present among young people in the past, probably making a lower standard of living on leaving home more acceptable then.

This overly protective behaviour can also be seen as the consequence of the awareness that everything is more difficult today: young people no longer have before them the prospect of a job for life or even a full-time job. So-called “atypical” jobs are becoming more common and these do not make young people any more “secure” even if they are working. This security has perhaps been denied to the generations of young Italians more than to their European counterparts because in Italy, people were more used to the idea of permanent job security. A journalist who has been observing the generational dynamics, notes for example that “the thirty-somethings of today are living with the justified conviction that the world which they want to enter as adults is one in which securing a decent life is more difficult than it was for older people” (Pellizzari, 1999). Some guarantees no longer exist: first, if a job was available it was for life; marriage once undertaken was for ever; and education ended with the conclusion of one’s studies. Today on the other hand, there is talk of lifelong learning, job instability, marital instability and it is as if, at the social level, the goal of access to adult life is increasingly difficult to reach. This may have engendered disillusionment and uncertainty and caused these generations to be less well equipped and less willing to run any “risks” and parents are willing to justify the “waiting game” played by their children. Even having gained a place in society and the workforce, young people do not seem any more secure, and many complain that once they have left home, they still feel very strongly the lack of the parental protective umbrella and the weight of responsibility that an independent life implies.

In the absence of external security, young people are looking for emotional security in the context of their private lives and this partly justifies attitudes which may seem obsessive on the part of the parents, attitudes which previous generations had fought against in the name of independence and gaining freedom from the family.

- *The pervasiveness of the parental role*

When a child moves out, this marks an important change in the life of its parents and initiates a new stage of the family cycle, the “empty nest” phase. Not many people see any advantages to be gained by a child’s leaving home. Any advantages mentioned by children are mainly of a material nature and

⁸ According to the IRP survey, conducted in 1997 on a sample of individuals aged between 20 and 49 years, 67% of the respondents maintains that “it is the precise duty of parents to do their best for their children even at the cost of their own well-being”.

parents do not see any benefits in terms of greater free time and more privacy. The fear of facing a new phase of life for a generation that is not accustomed to having time to dedicate to itself, surely makes the transition from full to empty nest even more difficult. This is a very different picture from the one we see in the Netherlands where neither the children nor the parents experience a child leaving home as “a stressful experience” and furthermore “there is a growing number of mothers who are happy at the prospect of having more time to spend on their own activities and on cultivating their personal interests.” (M. du Bois Reymond, p.112).

This is a situation in which: conditions to encourage home-leaving are not created; where, even if parents agree it is a natural event, moving out is not discussed despite the fact that many children have reached and passed the age considered ideal for this step; and where it is thought that the children are not yet ready to take such a big step. Such a situation seems to indicate a defensive attitude on the part of parents and is in line with a desire to postpone the moment of leaving home which for Italian parents marks an extremely significant loss of social role.

- *There is still no alternative to married life*

As regards family choices, in Italy there are only two choices for young people: to get married or to stay on at home with their parents. Living alone or with friends or unmarried cohabitation are not very common at all. Therefore in Italy, getting married later means prolonging the period spent at home with one's parents.

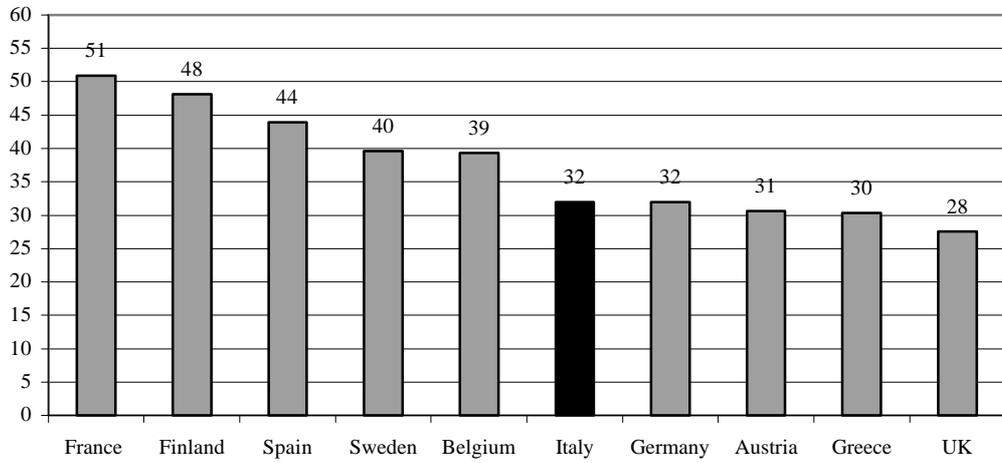
The lack of any development of living arrangements other than marriage does not seem to be due to a standpoint that is ideologically opposed to children leaving home before getting married as was the case in the past (Bonifazi et al., 1999). On the contrary, it seems that leaving home is postponed until it becomes unavoidable due to marriage because otherwise parents seem to think it would mean breaking off emotional closeness with one's children “for no reason”. The idea of children who live on their own is for many parents a source of anxiety and concern, it provokes a sense of loss, creates a void and children feel that their parents' happiness depends on them and on their staying at home. Young people respond to their parents' anxiety by putting off the moment of moving out until the “right” time arrives and this time continues to coincide with the celebration of marriage - still the magic key that opens the door of the parental home house and justifies a child in leaving.

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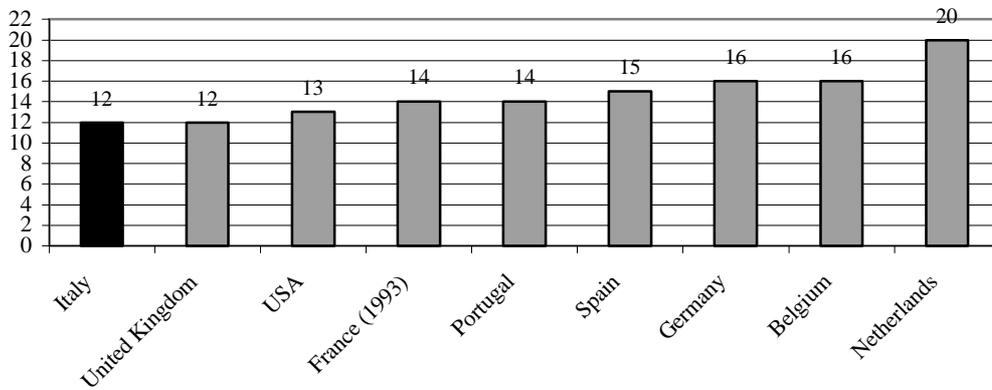
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Tables, Graphs and Figures

Graph 1a - Students aged 20-24years in some EU countries, 1996 (%)

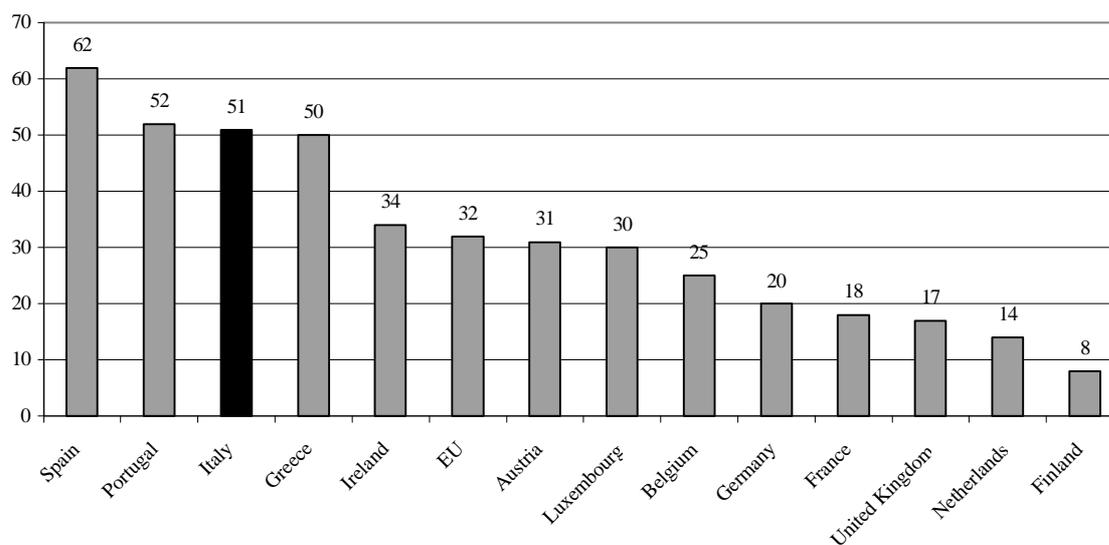


Graph 1b - Young people with university degrees, 1996
(out of 100 people of the same age)



Source: Istat elaboration on OECD data

Graph 2 - Young people aged 25-29 years living at home
in some EU countries, 1996 (%)



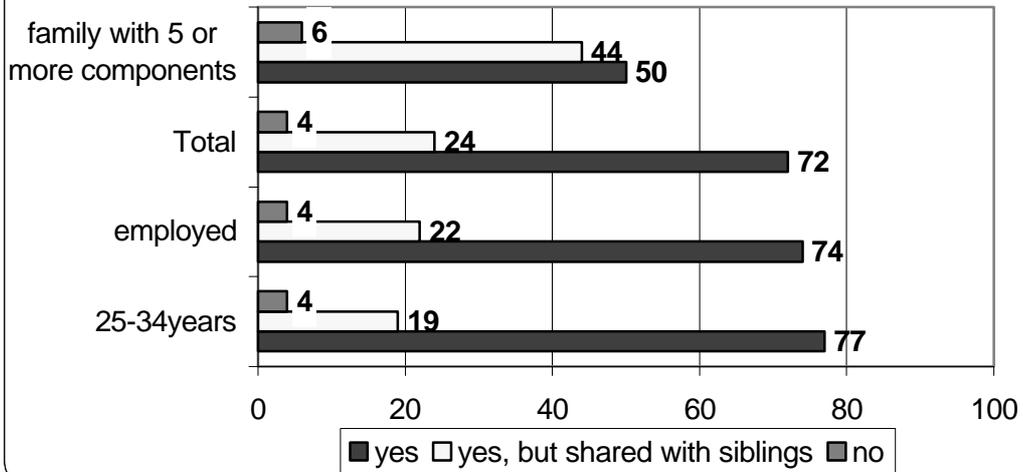
Source: Eurostat

Tab. 1 - Young living at home by age group and sex in Italy, 1987 and 1997

Age group	Total		Employed	
	1987	1997	1987	1997
<i>Males</i>				
20-24	86.1	92.7	77.9	88.5
25-29	46.5	68.1	40.4	59.6
30-34	16.5	28.7	14.3	24.2
Total	51.4	61.3	39.9	48.4
<i>Females</i>				
20-24	65.2	83.2	67.5	80.6
25-29	23.7	44.0	27.5	43.8
30-34	7.5	15.7	9.1	18.4
Total	34.1	46.2	33.2	40.7
<i>Total</i>				
20-24	75.6	87.9	73.6	85.1
25-29	35	56	35.7	52.9
30-34	12.2	22.2	12.4	22.0
TOTAL	42.8	53.8	37.4	45.3

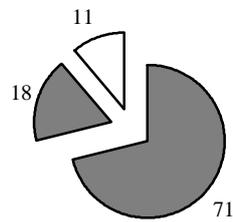
Source: ISTAT, Indagine Multiscopo sulle famiglie, 1987 and 1997.

Graph 3 - Availability of own room in some categories of respondents, 1998

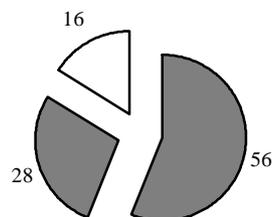


Graph 4 - Freedom in using the house, 1998 (%)

Inviting friends around

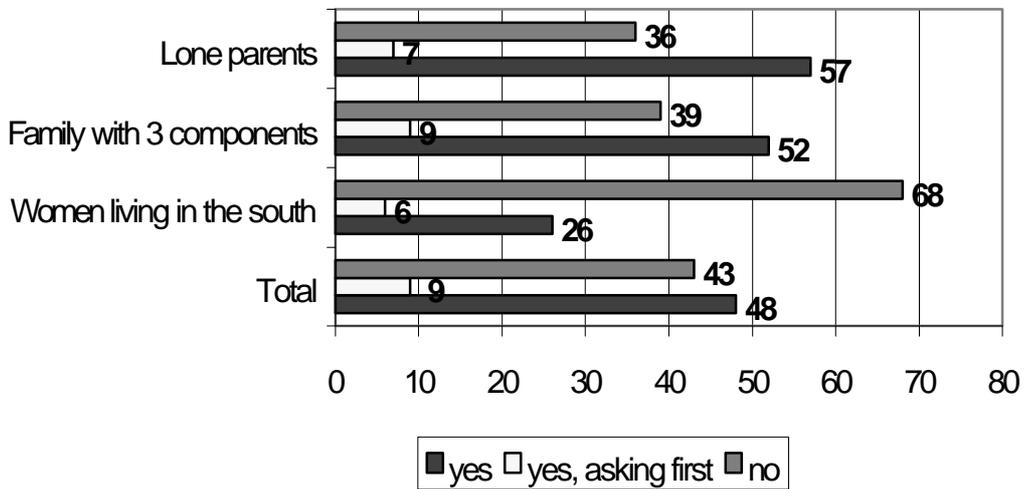


Organizing parties and dinners

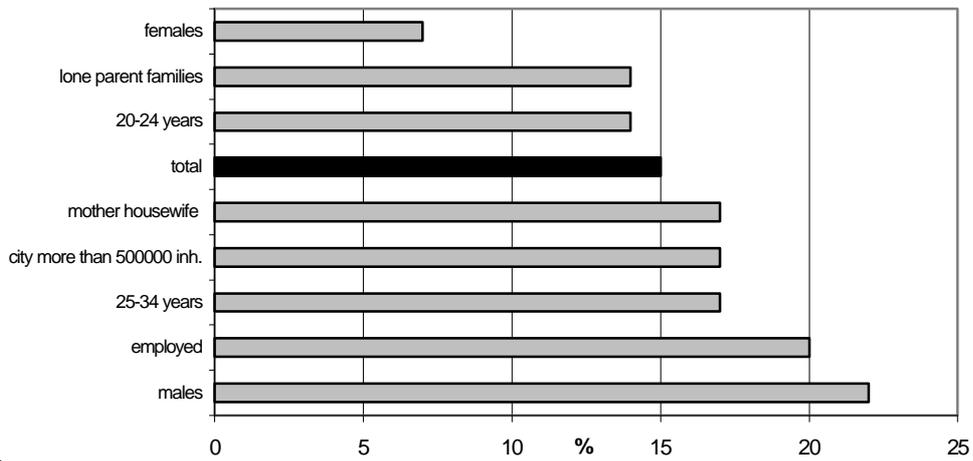


■ Yes ■ Yes, asking first □ no

Graph 5 - Freedom to be alone with one's partner in the home in some categories of respondents, 1998 (%)



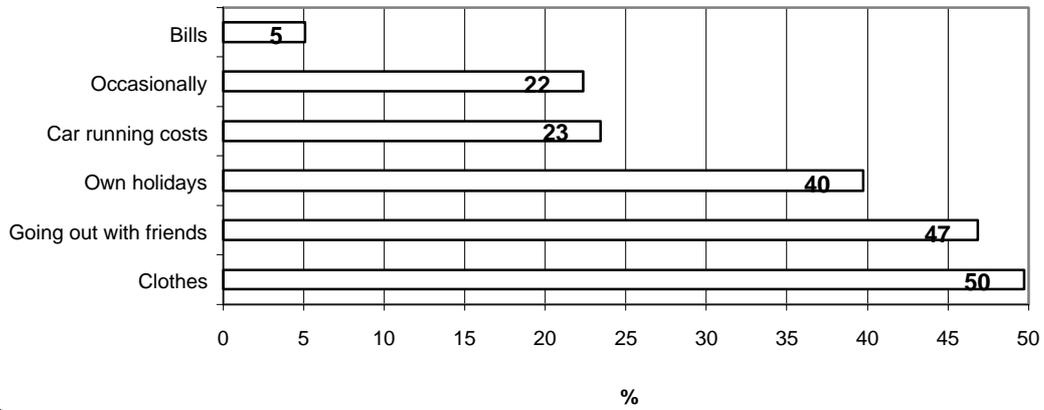
Graph 6 - Respondents who do not contribute to family organization according to some characteristics, 1998 (%)



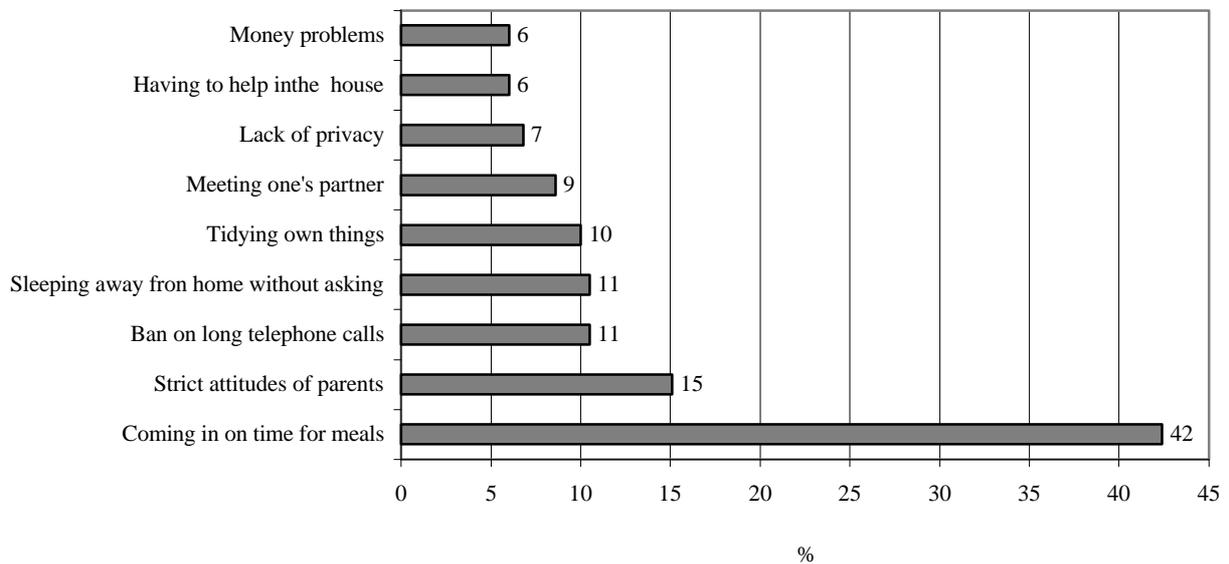
Tab. 2 - Young people's contribution to family organization, 1998
 (% calculated on the basis of all young people)

<i>Activities carried out</i>	Total	Employed full-time	Males
None	15	20	22
House cleaning	41	33	20
Shopping	40	35	31
Bed making	29	25	22
Cleaning own room	27	24	21
Cooking	26	19	14
Small repairs	16	19	26
Accompanying parents	15	15	17
Paying bills	9	9	11
Washing and ironing	8	6	2
Administrative tasks	3	5	5

Graph 7 - Economic contribution from employed young people to family expenses, 1998 (%)



Graph 8 - Constraints living at home
 (% calculated on the basis of those who suffer from them), 1998



Tab. 3 - Main advantages for children on leaving home
 1998 (multiresponse of respondents. %)

	Children say	Parents say
Independence	47	28
Freedom of movements	44	27
Freedom to choose	43	26
Privacy	22	5
No advantages	17	23
Greater sense of responsibility	12	20
Having new experiences	6	16

Tab. 4 - Main advantages for parents when a child
 Leaves home. 1998 (multiresponse of respondents. %)

	Parents say
No advantages	55
Saving on expenses	21
Less work	17
More freedom	12
More free time	7
More privacy	5
More space	3
Fewer arguments	2
Lower telephone bills	2

Tab. 5 - Main disadvantages for children on leaving home. 1998
(multiresponse of respondents. %)

	Children say	Parents say
More expenses	53	40
Housework	45	38
Cooking	29	14
Ironing	16	8
Loneliness	14	7
More responsibility	14	19
Tidying and cleaning	11	12
Loss of closeness	11	7
Making own rules	6	11
Lack of protection	6	12
No disadvantages	6	12

Tab. 6 - Main disadvantages for parents when a child
leaves home. 1998 (multiresponse of respondents. %)

	Parents say
Loss of closeness	50
Loneliness	34
More worries	24
No disadvantages	20
Distance	17
Less control of children	6
Lack of moral support	6
Lack of help in the house	5
Economic help	2

Tab. 7 - Necessary conditions for young people to leave home. 1998
(multiresponse of respondents. %)

	Children say	Parents say
Stable job	61	49
Reasonable income	56	26
Marriage	46	58
Accommodation	39	23

