

the Feathering Empty Nest

IF YOU'RE A PARENT, YOU LIKELY PRIDE YOURSELF ON RAISING KIDS WHO GROW UP TO BE HEALTHY, PRODUCTIVE, INDEPENDENT ADULTS. BUT WHEN CHILDREN ACTUALLY LEAVE, SOME PARENTS REVEL IN THEIR NEWFOUND FREEDOM WHILE OTHERS FEEL UNMOORED. HERE'S HOW TO REBUILD.

By Jason Teich and Davia Sills

The luckiest parents will face the day their children fly the coop—after all, who would want it any other way? We all want to launch our kids, healthy and whole, into the world! Here, psychologist Suzanne Degges-White, an expert in life transitions at Northern Illinois University, discusses how parents can come together, regain their footing, remake their lives and find their passions once children have left home.

Q What are the most common emotional responses a couple have to the empty nest?

It seems that there are two polar-opposite sets of expectations about an impending empty nest. On one end, there are couples who are eagerly awaiting the freedom that an empty nest will allow. They see this as a new opportunity to get to know each other again and to be able to make plans without having to take anyone into consideration beyond themselves. Then there are those couples who are dreading the emptiness they feel will fill the house once their child departs. They worry about the lack of companionship or the change in their own identities that will arrive when their parenting role begins to ebb. What can be surprising is when couples who are expecting loneliness and a feeling of bereavement are pleasantly surprised by how much they enjoy the now empty house or how much freer they feel to change up their routines. And, at the other end of the spectrum, those couples who were counting the days until they had their home all to themselves might be surprised at how lonesome their home now feels.

Q What are the benefits to a couple who now has an empty nest?

There's a new sense of freedom that the "adults" can enjoy in their home now. While most adolescents seem to lead a relatively autonomous life, now you really can stop worrying about a lot of little things you might not have even realized you were worrying about—leaving on the porch light, figuring out how many places to set at the table each night, which days were game days, who needed the car when and so on.

Q How can you explore your own sense of self?

With all the children out of the house, you are able to explore your own personal identity. Hobbies and leisure pursuits don't have to be scheduled around child-related

commitments—and you don't have to wonder who took the fresh can of tennis balls or if the book-club schedule conflicts with game nights. Focus on the joy of knowing that you and your partner are free to enjoy intimacy without a child showing up unexpectedly.

Q What are the challenges for a couple faced with an empty nest?

When the last child leaves home, there can be a lot of dissonance. It can be disconcerting when being a mother or a father is a huge part of your identity but there are no longer any children in the house to parent. Warning: Don't let yourself suddenly try to parent your partner, younger colleagues at work and so on. Parenting isn't a "one size parents all" proposition—and your attempts to parent other adults may cost you some goodwill from others.

Q How do couples deal with the sense of loss?

Grief is a natural response. It's okay if you need to spend some time sitting in your child's now empty room and take a short ride down memory lane. It's normal to miss your child, but it's not normal to obsess about their absence or let your grief get in the way of daily activities. It's normal to hold on to a child's favorite blankie or sports jersey; it's not normal to hold that blankie or jersey on a regular basis!

Q A big challenge of the empty nest is that it is often accompanied by other transitions. How does that work?

Caregiving for older adult relatives may now be needed. Job transitions may be upcoming—either stepping down at work, retiring or beginning a new job hunt now that the kids are grown. Sometimes it's not just the effect of one transition, a child moving out; it can be the combined effect of multiple transitions and losses at one time that makes the empty nest such a painful experience. Empty nesters may also

Take the time to rebuild your life as a pair.



Having the house to yourself can feel liberating.

feel that this is a milestone in the aging process. As the children mature and grow up, their parents are also maturing, but it's a time when our culture would consider their aging and development as growing old, not growing up. This can be a rude awakening for some people as they realize their primary parental role has downshifted into a brand-new life stage.

Q When the children are no longer there for a couple to focus on, how can the couple come back to being closer to each other? How can they fill the space left between them?

This can be a difficult time for many couples—especially today, when our culture has enthusiastically embraced the notion of child-focused parenting so completely. For many couples facing a newly empty nest, this period puts them at a loss as to how to fill their leisure time. Calendars without kids' activities scheduled into them can seem hopelessly empty. However, this is the time when the calendar can now be populated with shared activities between partners. If you feel that you and your partner have grown apart—a feeling that a lot of people admit to once their kids have all moved out—then it's essential that you focus on an activity or pastime that can help to bring the two of you back together.

Q What about trying new things?

Some couples will decide to pursue an activity that neither partner has tried before. This might be a sport, such as biking or golf; a hobby, like baking or French cooking; or a commitment to a healthier lifestyle, in terms of diet and exercise. If there used to be a regular game night or activity schedule when your child was at home, choose that night to schedule a shared activity with your partner. You'll be able to fill that hole and keep up in the habit of blocking off that time on your calendar. There should also be many

new opportunities for conversation and sharing between partners. This can be a positive development in many ways—but it might make for some awkward and silent mealtimes in the beginning. Once a couple have asked each other about their days, the conversation can fall flat. Challenge each other to commit to listening and engaging with each other during meals. Find some topics that interest both of you and relearn the skillful art of shared communication. If there's a cause that really excites you, encourage your partner to get involved in cause-related activities. You've worked together for 18-plus years to raise your child—now you can find another positive way to work together for a good cause.

Q What can a couple do to make their relationship better than ever, once they have an empty nest?

Some couples bounce right back when the last child heads out, but most end up at a loss once the reality of the smaller family footprint sets in. To successfully navigate the transition, acknowledge that time and experience have transformed your relationship. If either of you believes that the effects have been less than positive, openly address those concerns. Until you admit that there might be a problem, you can't work together to find a solution.

Q Can couples ever get back to the way they were at the start of their relationship?

While sometimes it can be unsettling for a couple to realize that they related to each other primarily through their kids, it's also an opportunity to enjoy that feeling of novelty and newness that early relationships typically offer. Getting to know your partner all over again can be surprisingly enjoyable when you think of it as renewing your relationship, even if it sometimes feels like “rewiring” an old relationship. Talk about what drew you to each other in the first place

when your relationship was just beginning. This helps you get back into the mind-set of romantic partners, not just coparents. Find a way to share with each other every day. You can make a commitment to having dinner chats and breakfast conversations, taking daily walks without the cell phones—whatever is going to work for your schedule. Make the commitment as sacrosanct as you possibly can.

Q What about the physical space a child has left behind?

Satisfy the desire to fill the space in your daily life or home with a literal filling of the space, in the room where your child once slept. Furnish that empty bedroom with exercise and fitness equipment. If a home gym is not your thing, consider a photography darkroom; a studio for your painting; or a media room, complete with reclining theater seats and a giant screen. Consider



Forgotten Pleasure: Coffee and a paper on the balcony.

the additional space in your life an invitation to be more generative and creative than ever before.

Q What should couples avoid?

Don't sweat the small stuff—without a child in the house to receive your focused attention, little irritants may suddenly become more significant than they should be. Don't assume that your partner wants to be the recipient of the attention you once gave your child. Instead, find a hobby or activity where you can channel some of that newfound time and energy. Don't be surprised if the transition is difficult—or if it isn't! Everyone handles this life transition differently, and it's okay to feel euphoric or grief-stricken (for a little while—then you need to pick yourself up). Don't make a snap decision about your relationship with your partner, even if things feel rough. Just because the last kid has moved out doesn't mean you must go too.

5

STEPS FOR SUCCESS ONCE THE KIDS ARE GROWN

With the gift of time, nurture your relationship and pursue your personal dreams.

The empty nest is a cliché—and, as positive psychology life coach Caren Osten points out, it isn't really the truth. “There are still parents in the nest once the children have left,” says Osten. It can feel bewildering for spouses who have spent so many years as parents to suddenly find themselves as part of a dyad again, right back where they started. Though the new situation can feel strange, that doesn't mean the parents feel sad; empty nesters are middle-aged and largely still working, and they can find it liberating to have time to pursue their own interests, desires and dreams.

According to Osten, time can be either the greatest ally or greatest adversary of parents grappling with the empty nest: “More time allows for people to refocus their energy, allowing parents to reconnect as a couple through more frequent date nights and dinners together at home. And then there's the increased flexibility, less daily responsibility and the ability to make choices that are not based on a child's schedule and needs.” On the other hand, Osten adds, “for couples who have experienced a diminished ability to communicate as romantic partners, the time without kids can feel like an emptiness that the children once filled.” Osten offers ways in which couples can navigate the empty nest in a healthy way and avoid its pitfalls.

1

Consistently schedule time for activities as a couple, such as meals out, concerts, morning bike rides and weekend museum visits.

2

Vocally communicate your feelings about your empty nest to your partner so that they don't interpret your sadness as marital anger or disappointment. Openly expressing how you are feeling can evoke empathy from your partner, thereby sparking increased intimacy.

3

Try a new hobby—together—like learning bridge, taking a cooking class or joining a movie club.

4

Avoid judging your partner. Instead, ask how they're feeling about this new phase of life and give them room to have their own reactions to their child leaving home.

5

Bring fun and play back into your romantic lives to help rekindle your old connection.

➔ By making healthy adjustments after your child leaves home, you can learn to embrace your new phase of life and forge an even closer connection with your intimate partner.