

# What Happens Now? The Children Are Gone

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## What is the Empty Nest Stage of Life?

The empty nest stage is the time in parents' lives after their last child has left the home. Some think the term "empty nest" is too negative. They use the phrase "postparental stage" instead, because this is the time after parents have raised their children. Still, others point out that parenting does not end with the launching of children. Parenthood enters another phase that requires the relationship to change. Eventually the relationship comes to be shared by two competent adults. One of those adults still is the parent and the other is the grown son or daughter. Thus, we never cease being parents. We just change the role to match the appropriate season of life. But, "empty nest" is still the most common term.

Although each individual or couple will face a different set of circumstances, these are some of the more common struggles for parents entering the empty nest stage of life. Each challenge is also an opportunity for growth:

- **Change in Roles or Loss of Roles.** We all feel better if we feel useful. The role of a parent raising children is one of the most fulfilling anyone can ever have. It is natural to feel a void once that role is lost. If parents have other roles outside of being parents, they are likely to face less of an abrupt transition. If they do not have other roles, they may need to seek them in order to feel complete in this stage of life. However, some may try to overdo their activities to avoid dealing with the lonely parts of this transition. For people who have spread themselves

thin with volunteer activities and parental duties, the start of the empty nest stage is a good time to re-examine their motives for future responsibilities. Are they taking on new roles because they are truly interested in the projects, or are they quickly committing to stay busy and avoid feeling empty?

- **Marital Issues.** Children often provide a diversion that prevents parents from looking at problems in their marriage. When the nest empties, the marriage remains, but the diversion does not. Buried issues resurface. Unhealed hurts or disappointments from the past often return. However, marital satisfaction often goes up after the children leave. Couples need to take a second look at their goals as they enter the second half of their marriage. It can provide an opportunity to become stronger or to drift apart. If couples feel they are having a hard time re-connecting, going down the following checklist may help locate the problem, which can be the first step in working through it:

- 1) How well do we know and understand each other? Do we know each other's likes, dislikes, dreams, and goals?
- 2) How do we show our fondness and admiration for each other?
- 3) Do we turn toward each other rather than away from each other in going about our daily lives? Do we share everyday thoughts and happenings?
- 4) Do we accept influence from each other?
- 5) How do we solve our problems?



6) How do we deal with issues in which we may never agree?

7) How do we have fun together?

Some couples may find it easy to begin to make small and gentle changes in the way they respond to each other. Other couples may have a difficult time and realize that they need to seek professional help in nurturing their marriage.

- **Career change.** The empty nest stage often coincides with a time when one or both parents' career is likely to change. Many women who put off working in the early childrearing years are reaching the peak of their careers while some men are winding down their careers. Women often become more assertive in their middle years. While these changes may be different for each couple or individual, they need to be recognized and seen as another change that requires adjustment. If focusing on future career ambitions is difficult, writing up a tentative vision statement of what a couple hopes to accomplish professionally and sharing it with each other might be a good place to start.
- **Caregiving shifts.** Many parents have looked forward to their children leaving home as a season in life when they can finally do some things for themselves. However, just when the children are leaving home, the parents find that their own older parents begin to require more attention and care. Thus, a time of resting from being responsible for dependants may not come the way they had hoped it would.
- **Bodies change.** Health issues begin to become more of a concern. Also, the empty nest often coincides with menopause in women and a decrease in sexual desire in men. However, some surveys say that sexual satisfaction actually can go up with age if the couple is doing well in other areas. Anxiety about decreased performance and satisfaction is

often a bigger sexual short-circuiter than age itself. If physical ability to be intimate is a concern, a doctor may have some practical solutions or prescriptions that can be surprisingly effective.

- **Relationships with children.** They are still important, but will need to change. If there were problems in the relationship before the children left, they are likely to remain until worked through. The task of accepting the children as adults is also difficult for many parents. Research has shown that how the parents feel about the way children have left the home is usually more important to their adjustment than the fact that the children are no longer there. It is helpful to know whether the children are launched for good, or if the parents expect them to come back again and live in the nest. In today's society, many children leave only to return again for financial or emotional reasons. Regardless of the situation, we are talking about a relationship that is likely to continue forever, so it is important to maintain it through the changes both the parents and children will go through. Ask yourself if you have some disappointment with your children, and then ask yourself what theirs might be with you. Although the relationship may be good overall, acknowledging that you want to understand their frustrations can strengthen it.

Here are a few scenarios that could occur in the empty nest stage. After each stage, some potential risks and opportunities are listed:

### Scenario #1

Beth was an elementary schoolteacher when she met Dan. When Beth had their first son, she stopped working outside the home and stayed with their son. They had three more children over the next six years. She had originally planned to go back to teaching after Amy, their youngest, went to kindergarten, but Dan made enough money

from his business to keep them comfortable. So she poured herself into her family. She not only ran the children back and forth from practices to performances to sleepovers, but she cherished her role as a friend inside the home as well. Dan worked long hours at the business, and she enjoyed providing a restful, fun home for him to come home to. As her children moved into adolescence, she became a good friend, a good listener, and someone they could trust with their problems. Their youngest child, Amy, has just left for college. They had hoped she would go to a different college, and they are a little worried about the guy she is dating. Dan's business is thriving, and he no longer needs to spend as much time there. He has diabetes, but manages well. Now it's just the two of them.

**Potential risks:**

- 1) Beth is losing roles that may have given her an identity.
- 2) They may have disappointment with the adult choices of their daughter.
- 3) Dan's diabetes could threaten his health or have an impact on his ability to function sexually.
- 4) The empty nest may cause Dan to regret how much his work has caused him to miss out on relationship time with the children.

**Potential opportunities:**

- 1) Beth may have time to pursue teaching or other dreams she has put on hold to nurture her family.
- 2) With Dan's career demanding less, they may be able to do more things together and reconnect as best friends.
- 3) Dan may have time to take better care of himself physically as he has to work less.
- 4) Beth's friendships with her children may have paved the way for good relationships with them as adults.

**Scenario #2**

Marcus and Christie met in high school and married after their first year of college, deeply in love and sure they were right for each other. Christie got pregnant unexpectedly after their second year of college. They both dropped out, planning to go back after a year. Marcus worked for a car dealership and Christie had a complicated pregnancy. The baby had health problems, and Christy needed to be with him full time for the first two years of his life. Then Christy went to work as a secretary, putting the dream of college on hold to help the family get by. Neither ever returned to college. Marcus had an affair eight years ago, but they stayed together for the children and he has been faithful ever since. They seldom have sex any more and figure that trend will not change as they get older. He still works for the auto dealership, and she is still a secretary. It seems as if they always have been struggling to make ends meet. Their first son joined the military and their second has just left for college, where he received a scholarship. Finally there is no one to support.

**Potential risks:**

- 1) After all of the struggles and the affair, their marriage may seem pointless now that the children are gone. It may be hard to see a reason to work on becoming close again.
- 2) Both may have stored up disappointments since they each sacrificed educational and career dreams for the family.
- 3) Lack of job satisfaction may become a problem.
- 4) Since they struggle with intimacy, both may have come to rely on the children for emotional support instead of each other.

**Potential Opportunities:**

- 1) They can rediscover the person they were each in love with when they





married, before life threw them so many curveballs.

- 1) They can forgive for its own sake, not just to preserve a home for children.
- 2) If stress decreases, sexual intimacy may improve in surprising ways.
- 3) They can enjoy their children as adults and be proud of their accomplishments.
- 4) If finances allow, they could be free to pursue new career ideas.

### Scenario #3

Lynne and her husband, Al, divorced twelve years ago when their daughter, Kelsey, was 8. Lynne is a florist and prides herself on balancing a successful business and strong relationships with her daughter, as well as her aging mother. Until recently, her daughter, Kelsey, has always lived with her, and they are best friends. Now, at 20, Kelsey has just moved into her own apartment. She pays the rent from her salary as an assistant at Lynne's flower shop. Although Lynne has dated several men, she has never seriously considered remarrying. Her business and daughter prevented this. Kelsey may get engaged soon and it's likely she will move out of state. Lynne's father died when she was young, and now her mother is experiencing increasing pain from arthritis. Lynne is glad to help. She also looks forward to having more time to date with her daughter gone.

#### Potential Risks:

- 1) Since so much of Lynne's life is tied into her daughter, losing her roles as boss, landlord, and constant friend may leave her struggling for an identity.

- 2) Even if she is ready to enjoy dating and pursuing more of her own interests, she may be pulled away by the needs of her own mother.
- 3) Now that she has survived being a single mom and launching her daughter into the world, some of the pain and and romantic loss from her divorce may have time to resurface.

#### Potential Opportunities:

- 1) She may have time to pursue other enriching relationships, including dating.
- 2) Watching her daughter grow up and enter marriage may provide Lynne with satisfaction and hope.
- 3) She may have time to catch her breath and come to terms with some of the disappointments of her past.
- 4) She may try new ideas in her flower shop.

We can try to remember that people going through an adjustment often forget that they are experiencing a normal transition in life. Perhaps they have never really thought the adjustment would pose a challenge. It is important to assure people that some difficulty adjusting to their children leaving home is to be expected. Moreover, as we have seen from the previous scenarios, even something as simple as an empty bird's nest carries a great deal of possibility.

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