

Adjusting to the Empty Nest

By Dr. David Lowenstein

In the beginning, it is all dirty diapers and late-night feedings. Suddenly the kids are crawling, then walking, then talking and then riding bikes. Before you know it, you are running a taxi service for them and their friends. Then they are running one for themselves. You find yourself as the switchboard operator, sitting up nights browsing the classifieds for a second job to pay the phone bill, worrying about when they are coming home and wondering if you will ever have access to your car again.

Once you have children your life becomes a blur... and as quick as you blink your eyes, they are gone.

After two decades of screen doors banging, parent-teacher conferences, wet towels on the bathroom floor and evenings at the ball field, your time is yours again and the house seems so quiet.

For many parents this is an exciting phase, a time to watch your adult children conquer the world while you rediscover personal interests or revel again in the joys of couplehood. It can also be a painful time – a period of jarring transitions and mixed feelings. It is often difficult to adjust to the reality that the children are not there, that your life does not revolve around them anymore. Suddenly there is a vacuum in your life. And the question is “how do you deal with it?”

When children leave home all parents experience feelings of sadness and loss. This is commonly known as Empty Nest Syndrome. What is important to recognize however, is how deeply it can affect some parents and how quickly other parents can adjust to the new living arrangement.

If a parent is not adjusting to their “empty nest”, they should not ignore it. Symptoms of depression to watch for include a sense of fatigue, loss of appetite, an inner feeling of restlessness that makes it hard to relax, difficulty sleeping and a loss of interest in life. But at the same time, “empty nesters” should also be aware that this time is a transition and the sadness may pass. Realizing that the relationship has changed, accepting one’s new role as the parent of adults, and respecting grown children’s independence are key factors in coming to grips with Empty Nest Syndrome.

Parents are more likely to struggle with an empty nest if they have not nurtured independent interests that are separate from their children and from parenting. Suddenly parents have extra time on their hands and may feel at a loss for ways to fill it. It is important for couples to discuss how they will deal with their empty nest; and ideally, they should start before the children leave for good.

Couples can fill their newly found time with travel, hobbies, reading, going back to school, or volunteering.

As for assessing whether you are likely to have a hard time when your children leave home to start their own lives, past transitions are a good gauge. Parents who struggled emotionally when their child started school or went to camp for the first time are more likely to have difficulty adapting to a permanent empty nest.

If you are a parent and will soon face an “empty nest,” it is important to focus on the positives – the newly found freedoms and the opportunities to establish bonds of friendship with grown children on levels that might not have been possible before.

David Lowenstein, Ph.D., is a Psychologist located in German Village area of Columbus, Ohio. Dr. Lowenstein often appears as a medical expert on television and radio stations, and provides corporate wellness presentations focused on family issues to small and large organizations nationwide.