

Testimonies From Empty Nesters

Methodology: A series of individuals and couples from a variety of regions in the US were consulted regarding the topic of Empty Nesting. These individuals and couples represented various positions in life: married couples, single parents, the widowed, and never-married. Their tidbits of wisdom and experiences are summarized and included anonymously below. Several common themes emerged and became apparent from those experienced in living through the empty nest years.

Lessons Learned:

First, the biggest change seems to be in the change of roles. One parent noted, “I didn’t feel as needed as when the kids were younger.” Another one said it was difficult being now only a “consultant.”

The second theme seemed to illustrate the physical distance from parent to child. It makes a difference how far away a child moves, or how infrequently the parent sees the child. Generally, the further the distance (geographically, relationally, and spiritually) separating the child and parent, the more difficult the empty nest phase transition is for the parent.

A third common theme was the “hardest part” and related to simply not seeing the children as much. Wondering “how they are doing”, “what they are doing”, if they are “using lessons we taught them” is not as attainable as before. Missing them, the friends they brought into our home and how quiet our new environment is now with their departure were frequently seen in those surveyed.

One widow noted, “I didn’t really feel like a widow until the children left home. I really missed the young people being around!”

It seems to make a difference when the first one leaves home, versus the last one leaving home. The empty nest phase can perhaps get better through experience, or it can get worse when the finality hits that the last child has left the nest.

One parent noted it took “getting used to” for the husband and wife to do things “alone” again. In her advice to new empty nesters, however, she noted this phase did not last long. However, numerous parents prized the opportunity that more time afforded to them, and one mom’s advice was, “Enjoy the extra time with your spouse, but be sure to carve out time for yourself.”

This thought was echoed by another who noted the extra time was “wonderful,” and she prized the time that could be spent in “new directions,” as well as in undistracted prayer. Numerous parents expressed the counsel that we should “stay in close contact with our children,” as well as one dad’s perspective that, “It helps to have grandchildren; they do a lot for old people!” Another dad wisely noted the need for contact, but stated, “Contact doesn’t equate with control.”

Often during the empty nest phase a role change happens and this may come with a mix of emotions. This role change often affects the mom more than the dad as the mom generally has been the primary caregiver, while often the dad has been the primary wage-earner. With an empty nest, the mom wonders, “So what am I supposed to do now? Is my role eliminated?” This change of identity is quicker to hit the Mom during the empty nest phase versus the identity change for the dad upon vocation retirement. Yet when does a parent retire? More often than not, the mom tends to regard the loss of communication as more of a hurt than the dad. In addition, making a meal for 2 people seems a demotion from the previous pattern of serving 5-10 family members daily.

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One dad listed a difficulty as, “How much of a parent-coach are you still supposed to be, and how much just a cheerleader are you to be?” Also a problem may be in determining where the parent fits into the married children’s lives, especially in terms of in-laws. This changing of roles by both parents and children is a key aspect of the empty nest. Another dad who saw a last son leave expressed a loss of help on the farm, and companionship to some degree. It is difficult to watch them make their own decisions, sometimes bad ones, without consulting parents. Again, it was recognized that their role and their priorities have switched from parents to helpmates. A few fathers asserted there was no difficulty in this transition, while one said the biggest adjustment for him was simply the recognitions of lost opportunities.

One biblical testimony described empty nesting as this: “. . .many of us parents have our biggest struggle [in] giving up the position we have in our children’s lives. The Bible is very clear to honor your father and mother, but it also talks about not having any other God before him. . .if we want our kids to be able to be fully committed to the plans the Lord has for them and be accountable to the Lord, then we need to begin to step away so they will look to the Lord instead of us.”

Other additional tips from experienced empty nesters:

- “Start early; pray to be satisfied.”
- “It’s a mistake to try to stop your children from moving on.”
- “Time helps. God provides.”
- “Stay busy. Keep an active social life.”
- “Pray that God ‘Make up the difference.’”
- “Don’t make big changes right away.”
- “Be patient with yourself and with your spouse as you walk into this.”
- “Be prepared to have less activity.”
- “Keep in touch with the kids, as much as possible.”
- “Keep in contact. Contact is not the same as control.”
- “Celebrate their independence as you let them know they’re missed.”
- “Enjoy the extra time with your spouse but be sure to carve out time for yourself.”
- “Take advantage of the slower pace to form deep relationships with grandchildren.”
- “Make every time at the table with your children count!”
- “Ensure relationships are ‘right’ before they leave.”
- “Regardless of your work, find a way to step away from at least a significant portion of it and use the time to do meaningful things with them and together as a family.”
- “Find activities and interests that you as a couple like to do, so you have something to do as a couple once your nest is empty.”

(Personal Interviews conducted by author; subjects are anonymous.)