

Empty Nest Syndrome

Kelsey Grodner, Lisa K. Lashley, and Charles J. Golden

Nova Southeastern University

Empty nest is a stage in development when children leave the parental home, thus leaving it “empty.” This stage occurs when children are at the age or point in life where they are ready to become independent and create a life of their own. Parents have various reactions to this change. Many parents look forward to this transition and view it as a highly positive event, while others have a more difficult time and deal with what is commonly called the “empty nest syndrome.” Empty syndrome is typically considered a maladaptive reaction to this transition, however this significant phase of life is considered to be a normal developmental event and leaving the home is a natural process of becoming an adult. Parents typically expect their children to leave the home in order to become independent and continue on with their development into adulthood.

Previous research has explored this stage of life and have found diverging results such that some parents may have a very negative reaction to an empty nest while others may instead flourish during this time. On one hand, parents, typically mothers, often identify with the care taking of their children and can be left with negative feelings such as depression, emptiness, and loneliness. Research suggests that these negative reactions stem from feelings of loss and grief that can ultimately lead to maladaptive reactions such as alcoholism, identity crisis, and marital conflict.

Based on conventional norms of gender roles, mothers may experience greater distress when children leave the home due to their higher involvement and energy placed into parenting and may feel a stronger bond towards their children. On the other hand, more recent research suggests that parents may not be as unhappy as once was thought when their children leave the

home. This transition can sometimes prove to be a more positive experience for parents. For example, being free of the parental everyday role can set the stage for parents to reconnect with each other and focus on their own interests that may have been neglected in the process of becoming a parent. Furthermore, an empty nest can lead to increases in marriage and life satisfaction especially for parents who maintain a healthy relationship with their children after they leave.

There are a variety of factors that play into how parents may react to their children leaving the home and whether it be a more positive or negative experience. Research has identified changes in family dynamics and social norms over time as well as cultural differences as some of the contributing factors. Changes in gender roles, opportunities to work, higher attainment of education, discovery of more effective birth control, later age of parenthood, and other significant changes may influence the experience of an empty nest in recent years.

For example, in the present day, mothers are more likely to be employed, educated, and may identify with a variety of roles beyond being a parent. Previously, children tended to leave the home for marital reasons whereas currently, young adults are more likely to leave to attend college or pursue careers. The age at which children leave the home has also fluctuated in recent years, many may postpone leaving or leave earlier, and this might not be a permanent transition. Furthermore, as life expectancies increase, a parent may spend much more time living alone after their children leave. These factors can make the transitional period to the empty nest in recent years blurred, elongated, and varied.

Although this transition is considered a normal phase of life, the experience of the empty nest can vary depending on social, cultural and personal beliefs, and norms revolving around expectations. Individualistic cultures may have a very different experience and reaction to

children leaving the home as compared to more collectivist and family oriented cultures. For example, baby boomers are more likely to expect their children to leave home for non-marital reasons such as attending school and pursuing a career. On the other hand, some traditional and ethnic groups expect that their children live at home until they complete college or when they marry.

In more Western cultures, parents typically view children leaving the home as indicative of successful parenting and they view adult children who remain at home negatively, that they are unable to live independently. Conversely, parents from non-Western cultures may view children leaving the home earlier as a failure of obtaining familial values and as a breakdown of the family. Regardless of what culture the family comes from, the way in which parents affectively cope with these changes is related to how and when a child leaves the home matches the familial expectations. If this transition goes against expectations, it may lead to a negative experience and can affect both the young adults as well as their parents. Thus, expectations and reasons for leaving are important factors to consider in understanding how parents respond to an empty nest.

Further Reading

Adelmann, P. K., Antonucci, T. C., Crohan, S. E., & Coleman, L. M. (1989). Empty nest, cohort, and employment in the well-being of midlife women. *Sex Roles, 20*(3-4), 173-189.

Barber, C. E. (1989). Transition to the empty nest. *Aging and the family, 15*-32.

Mitchell, B. A. (2016). Empty Nest. *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Family Studies.*

Mitchell, B. A., & Wister, A. V. (2015). Midlife challenge or welcome departure? Cultural and family-related expectations of empty nest transitions. *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 81(4), 260-280.