

## Empty Nest

I had been lamenting to friends about my empty nest until over the summer, two birds, weeks apart, found their way into my home. I then stopped complaining.

“The bus is coming in ten minutes.”

“What time will you be home for dinner? Is there anything in particular you want me to make?” “Do you have money for your trip?”

“Ice cream again before dinner?!”

“It’s already 11:00. Don’t you need to be up at 7?”

“I think I heard coffee stunts your growth. Drink coffee when you’re older.”

Does this sound familiar? Raising children has taken up so much of our emotional and mental energies. There are things we look back on and feel we did right, but there are also many regrets. Par for the course. Psychologist Bruno Bettelheim authored a book entitled *A Good Enough Parent*. He writes in the preface to his book, “*In order to raise a child well one ought not to try to be a perfect parent, as much as one should not expect one’s child to be, or to become, a perfect individual. Perfection is not within the grasp of ordinary human beings.*”

When parenting young children, it can feel like there is no end in sight: endless midnight awakenings, worry about health, navigating school systems and school choices, social drama—the list goes on. And then, one day, they are all grown. With every job out there in society, the better we are at what we do, the higher we climb, oftentimes to greater job security. Not the case with parenting. With regards to parenting, we work our way out of a job. The goal of healthy parenting is to successfully launch our children into independent, purposeful lives.

Many parents, particularly stay-at-home moms, feel an overwhelming emptiness, a void, once their last child leaves home. The energy that was once channeled into child care now has nowhere to go. It is not uncommon to experience feelings of loss, rejection, and/or anxiety over our children’s welfare. What are we to do with these feelings?

It may help to recognize how widespread this experience is for parents of grown children. Reaching out and asking others how they are impacted by an empty nest may be validating and also a way of creating a greater-depth connection with others. We are all different, yet a deep understanding of the human condition shows that we are, in many ways, very similar too. If we had established our identity around parenting, then what we may experience is an identity shift when the hands-on period is over. In more pronounced cases, it may actually be an identity crisis. Questions arise: Who am I if not

my kids' mom? What is the purpose of my life? While not easy, we have an opportunity at this time to rediscover, or maybe discover, ourselves in a way that until now may not have been feasible. Hobbies that we back-burnered, friends that we lost touch with, self-care, and educational opportunities all resurface with new possibilities for exploration.

Another potential challenge for parents is that this empty nest period is often a time for couples to take a brutally honest look at what has been happening in their marriage relationship. Couples may find that this is a vulnerable time for their marriage. It is not uncommon for marriages to shift into automatic gear when children are young. Children can be a great distraction from a lack of connection. When children then leave the home, the silence may feel deafening, the distance cavernous, and the loneliness profoundly painful.

There is opportunity here, too, for partners to turn toward each other and relearn ways to understand and appreciate each other. In marriage, partners are not meant to be the same in temperament or interests, and marriage is not meant to be conflict-free. The goal of a healthy relationship is to harness differences so that they are complementary and appreciated—to manage conflict so that the perspective of each partner is validated and seen as understandable. Partners can help fill the void in their nest by recreating their relationship. Committing to healing past hurts, engaging in healthy communication, and using the time freed up by children being out of the home to nurture the relationship can tap into the relationship's potential for closeness, fun, and intimacy.

Children growing up and out does not mean our job as parents are over. Children need their parents no matter how old they are. But it does require us to parent differently. There is a subtle shift in the relationship in that it becomes more of equals and mutual respect, especially with regard to boundaries. There may be times that we are triggered to feel abandoned, forgotten, or unimportant. The formula for expressing ourselves at these times is important. If we revert to 'guilting' our children, we will most probably elicit defensiveness and distance. However, if we are able to come forward with our more vulnerable feelings of hurt, we maximize our chances of being heard and establishing closeness.

Nothing stays the same and yet, as is written in Ecclesiastes, there is also nothing new. In life, we are continuously being challenged. Transitioning to life without children at home leaves us open to a host of new and exciting possibilities in relation to ourselves and to others, but at the same time, it may not be easy. For those experiencing the empty nest transition as difficult, I would recommend reaching out to those you trust and sharing yourself genuinely. There is often a lot of healing to experience through support and meaningful connection with others. In terms of identity, we each have a core self that is always there, waiting to be better known and loved. There is no better time to

invest in the relationship we have with our self than now.

*Dvora Levy is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker specializing in individual, couple and family therapy. She maintains a private practice in Cedarhurst and Brooklyn, NY. She works with a wide range of emotional issues providing services that span therapy for depression and grief counseling to parenting support, couples counseling and trauma. Visit [dvorahlevylcsw.com](http://dvorahlevylcsw.com) or call 516-660-7157 to learn more or to schedule an appointment.*