

Empty Nest and Newfound Spare Time: Tips for Parents Sending Their Kids to College

Sending your child to college is a huge milestone in every parent's life. Once move-in day arrives, you might be itching to drop your kid off and drive into the sunset to begin your new life. You have much more free time and feel much less stress than before; however, your home doesn't feel the same. There's no pitter-patter upstairs, no laughter down the hallway and nothing is missing from your pantry.

It's a new chapter for your family and a lot of conflicting emotions come with change: happiness, relief, sadness, uncertainty and hesitance. It's overwhelming, so how do you adjust to this new lifestyle?

What is Empty Nest Syndrome?

Author Dorothy Canfield first proposed the concept of empty nest syndrome (ENS) in her book, "Mothers and Children" in 1914 to describe feelings of grief and loneliness that parents may experience when their children move out.

ENS is not a proper mental health medical diagnosis but the idea is very real and these intense feelings are entirely normal. No parent will have the same experience sending their kids off into the world but there are some things to keep in mind as you enter this new phase.

Take Advantage of this Opportunity

For many parents, a large part of their identity is rooted in their child. Taking care of a growing child is hard work. Whether juggling sports games and dance recitals or volunteering for their school's parent-teacher association, it's time-consuming. This dedication makes it easy to lose sight of yourself apart from your child. A loss of individuality can make empty nesting much harder.

"Many feel lost and existentially filled with doubt about their purpose," Dr. Rachel Glik, a professional counselor with a background in organizational psychology and counseling, said in a blog post.

Remember that you are your own person. Finding new interests, hobbies, volunteer opportunities, and people to invest your time in can help you stay fulfilled and satisfied. This is an opportunity to get back into the dating scene, reconnect with your partner and strengthen old friendships.

“Let yourself explore, try new things, and you can even start with what you already know lights you up. Life is a beautiful journey of self realization. You are worthy of the fulfillment that comes from investing in yourself,” Glik added.

This is Not the End

Transitioning into this new phase is just that, a transition into something new. While children grow, mature and create a life of their own, you will always be their parent.

“Your role has changed, yes, but that doesn’t make it less important. Your child may be growing up, but they still need you. They just need you in a different way,” said psychologist Dr. Adam Borland.

Talking to your child about maintaining your relationship while also giving them space can help ease anxieties.

Celebrate

In the end, this process will always have its difficulties, so it’s easy to forget what led to this point. Give yourself credit for raising the child you did. Whatever path they chose—college, the military or straight into the workforce—you have supplied them with the tools necessary to succeed, and that deserves a pat on the back.