

THE EMPTY NEST:

Families with Grown Children

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THE EMPTY NEST: Families with Grown Children

Parents today may have some difficulty in knowing just when and how to let go of growing children. When does a child become an adult? When do we say "You are now on your own"? When he is legally able to vote and sign contracts? When he gets his own car and license? When he gets married? When he graduates from high school or when he graduates from college? We have no definite or easily identified time when young people become adults. In primitive society this was no problem. Young people in the middle teens went through a "rites of passage" which clearly said, "You are now an adult. Yesterday you were a child, today you are an adult." With early marriage and prolonged schooling, our adult society has a difficult time finding any ready-made answers to the questions of "When should we let go of children? Under what circumstances shall we continue to support them? When shall we put them on their own?"

Adulthood today is evidenced by mature judgment in making decisions. The adult is independent from the undo influence of others, yet is willing to listen. However, adult independence does not blind a person to the interdependence of all people. Acceptance of responsibility for the consequences of one's own decisions is a mark of adulthood.

Youth, in his or her efforts to grow up, usually place emphasis on independence. They need to:

1. **WORK FOR THEIR OWN GOALS.** At this time in life they need to feel that the goals they are working for are their own and not necessarily, although hopefully, those their parents have for them. They are more likely to make a good accounting of themselves if they feel a commitment to the goals they have set for themselves rather than to goals they have chosen in order to make their parents happy. They are also more likely to make a good accounting of themselves if they do not feel their parents expect them to because they are paying money for an education or to get started in marriage.
2. **DEVELOP OWN STYLE OF LIFE** as a mature and independent person. Young people today need freedom to work out their own style of life. Past parental guidance will have more influence on this matter than present parental "policing" efforts. Young people are following their own pathways toward their own goals, and parents must accept the risk, uncertainty, and possibility that things may not go as planned.
3. As young people work for their goals and develop their own style of life they will need **ENCOURAGEMENT AND SUPPORT.** They need their parents positive encouragement and support to work toward the goals that they have set for themselves. They may or may not be in the form of tangibles (gifts or money). In a survey of married college students, about 40 percent have received some kind of money gift and 18 to 20 percent received tangible gifts in support of their efforts. Again, help simply may be moral support and parental encouragement.

Some needs of parents:

1. **PARENTS FEEL RESPONSIBLE.** Parents have a need to feel they are adequately discharging their responsibility as parents. They may feel that they must do everything possible to help the son or the daughter avoid failure. They may have felt at fault if young adults have disappointments, setbacks,

or even failures. So they tend to do for the young what they feel is necessary to effectively assist young people in moving toward independence, and to minimize, if possible, any chance of disappointment or failure.

2. They may need to overcome a SENSE OF LOSS or a FEELING OF EMPTINESS. Parents may have a sense of loss if no longer actively involved in guiding the child's destiny. This is a sign of growing older. Also it may reveal a shallowness in one's life with one's spouse if so much total investment has been made in the welfare of the child. They may feel that there is no other aspect of life which demands their commitment.
3. VICARIOUS EXPERIENCE. Some parents, having decided that they are not going to really achieve all they had set out for themselves, may look toward their children as a means of fulfilling goals once held by the parents. Thus, vicariously living through the child's successes, often toward the goals the parents have set, they get a sense of completion of their own unsatisfied goals.

Questions for Discussion

1) What claims do parents have on their children? What do the young "owe" their parents? Does the fact that the parents have invested years of time and money and energy into the child's development, suggest that the child now owes something to the parents?

2) What claims do young people have on their parents? What do they expect from parents at this stage? In a relatively affluent society youths know that parents may quite well be able to give more time, effort, and money to their needs than perhaps in another period of time when parents just couldn't do any more. Do the young people see this as a continuation of the kind of attention and support that they've learned to expect as they grew up through the childhood years?

3) What causes parents to expect too much?

4) What causes youths to expect too much? What in the life history of this family and youth relationship might bring about over-expectations on the part of either or both?

What can we suggest that characterizes the healthy parent-child relationship at this point of letting go of children?

-Youth accepts responsibility by recognizing that one is responsible for oneself. While parents may offer guidance and assistance, the mature adult recognizes that he and he alone is responsible for his own welfare.

-Youth may feel that what they really owe their parents in relation to their own lives is to make the most of themselves.

-Parents recognize the uniqueness of each person, accept the fact that the child is not an extension of themselves but a separate individual with his own interests, his own capabilities, and his own goals.

-Parents offer help with as few strings attached as possible. Help may be in terms of time, energy, and money.

The most deeply satisfying experience parents can have is seeing that their children have a reasonably adequate adjustment to life and are meeting their goals and responsibilities to society. However, the choice of specific objectives, such as marriage partner, occupational choice, a school preference, should be the decision of the young person.

If these goals can be reasonably achieved, the process of letting go will be an experience of joy and fulfillment.

When do we let go of children? The decisive "rites of passage" of the primitive society is not an appropriate concept for our culture. Letting go is an on-going process. It begins early in the life of a child when we give him choices and opportunities to accept the consequences of his own behavior. He does not suddenly become an adult but merges into adulthood through a life of ever increasing independence and responsibility.

New Interest in Life

The empty nest period in the life of a family is described as the time that follows children leaving home. New adjustments are often necessary. With children gone there may be a void to fill. All parents face the inevitable fact that someday their children will leave home to pursue their own goals. Just as the young person must make many adjustments to life outside the family circle, parents must also make adjustments to their own new lives without the closeness of children. A home which has known the warmth of children can seem very empty without them. And many parents find it necessary to develop new interests and activities to fill the void left by the absence of their sons or daughters. These new interests may take many forms and they vary from person to person. The parents who develop them will find that life can still be very happy.

These new adjustments are probably most crucial for the wife and mother. For the woman particularly there is a void to fill. Often much of her energy has been centered around concern for, and interest in, her children. Further, without hardly knowing it, much of her initiative has been aimed directly or indirectly toward living for her children. Although many women have been finding other interests all along, these interests have usually been subsidiary, second to a primary concern for her children. Consequently, when children leave home there is likely to be a need to find new interests. Many find employment, in fact, nearly 35 percent of married women work. The greatest increase in numbers of working married women are those in their 40's. Some find continuing education stimulating. They have high school night classes or college work, or special short courses through university extension. Theater and art offer opportunities for creative hobbies. Many find personal satisfaction and a sense of contribution through community organizations: volunteer hospital service, League of Women Voters, family service agencies, mental health association, and youth serving organizations are examples of the many opportunities available. All offer opportunities for women to fill their time and also satisfy basic needs. These may serve purposes of leadership and provide opportunities for self-development. They offer outlets for the nurturant desire of women. If one is already moving in these directions before the children leave, the void is easier to fill and the letting go of children will come more readily.

In a different sense it is an empty nest for the father, too. The independence of children reminds him of his age and is apt to make him realize that he is not really

going to set the world on fire after all. This time in life may draw a husband and wife closer together, or may force them to face up to the fact that they have drifted apart and need to work to re-establish their relationship.

Being an In-Law

Parents and married children do continue to relate but on a different basis. The married spouse of the young person now comes first in his life and all other relationships are secondary.

The in-law relationship in our society has been stereotyped as one causing trouble. It should be pointed out in the beginning that, like all stereotypes, this an exaggeration of the situation. Most young people get along well with their in-laws and often consider their parents among their best friends. However, there is sufficient evidence of difficulty to warrant consideration of the relationship.

This concern over the in-law relationship is not something unique to our society. Anthropologists and sociologists in studying many societies have indicated that most of them have some rules or regulations regarding the contacts and behavior patterns between in-laws.

In our own society we tend to anticipate that there will be some kind of conflict. In practice, some 60 percent of in-law problems have been identified as problems between the women--the young wife and the mother-in-law. Problems may develop for several reasons.

1. The dependent relationship remains between the young wife and her mother. She may tend to turn to her mother in time of difficulty.
2. Young couples may project blame for their troubles on the parents, assuming that if a parent had behaved differently they might not be in the trouble they are now facing.
3. Spouses often make unfavorable comparisons between their own parents and the in-laws.
4. For the very young marrieds there is likely to be a rigorous insistence on independence and they are apt to look upon every encounter as an interference.
5. There is often a lack of sufficient maturity to handle interference properly.

There are two kinds of in-law problems. One type poses no threat to the marriage relationship of the young couple. This type of problem is one in which the presence of in-laws, perhaps close proximity, creates an invasion of a couple's life. Or there are in-laws who have needs and demand attention that both the young couple feel the desire to supply. This kind of problem is a manageable thing which might drain the resources or the patience of young couples, but it is not divisive. The need of the in-law does not threaten the relationship.

The other kind of in-law problem is the one that is usually meant by the stereotype. This means that a difference of opinion, a divisiveness, arises between the husband and wife because of relationships with the parents of one of them. It might mean that one,

usually the wife, is closer to her mother than the husband is to his parents. She feels an interdependence which he doesn't share, which he actually feels as a threat to their relationship and around which he develops a jealous attitude. This kind of divisiveness is really not the fault of the parents. No parents can really divide a couple unless they let it happen.

Evelyn Duvall has suggested that the best way to keep in-law problems from developing is, as nearly as possible, to feel as close or as distant to both sets of parents. This minimizes the tendency for accusations of favoritism. Often this is not practical and greater concern over one set of in-laws is appropriate.

The greatest likelihood of problems developing in the in-law relationship with young marrieds occurs, of course, when the young people are particularly immature and the older in-laws have need to maintain a dependent child. The in-laws may be using financial and tangible gifts as a means of control. But assistance need not necessarily cause problems if the young are mature and free from prejudice concerning the in-law stereotype, and if the older couple is able to give and still let go of their children.

Questions for Discussion

1. How can parents reassure their children that "we want what's best for you"?
2. What are some of the danger signs that suggest parents might be too controlling?

We might summarize by indicating the qualities of good relationship between a young couple and their parental in-laws. On the part of parents it is very helpful if they:

1. Accept the young couple as grownups, equals, adults worthy of respect and dignity.
2. Constantly remind themselves of the priority of the new marriage relationship for the young people.

For youth to:

1. Remember that the marriage relationship comes first. If they keep that in mind they are less apt to drift into the divisive type pattern sometimes involved with the in-law relationship.
2. Realize that it takes time to strengthen the bonds of marriage. They should not be impatient and unduly threatened by temporary feelings of jealousy.

And it's good for both sides to remember that you can't have an in-law without being one.



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