



News Column for Week of June 22, 2020

The Children Are Gone. What's Next?

It's that time of year when there is a lot of bird activity. They have built their nests and most are filling the air with their individual songs. If you come across an empty bird's nest, would it be an encouraging sight, or one that would strike you as sad and lonely?

The empty nest stage is the time in parents' lives when their last child has left the home. Some think "empty nest" is a negative term. Others believe that parenting does not end when their children have spread their wings and other opportunities have become available.

Whatever the thought, parenthood enters another phase that requires relationships to change when the children leave. Eventually, the relationship between parent and child is shared between two competent adults. One of those adults is still the parent, and the other is the grown child.

The role of a parent raising children is one of the most fulfilling anyone can ever have. There can be a big void once that role is lost. Replacing that void with volunteer activities can be helpful in the transition into the empty nest stage of life.

Children often provide a diversion that prevents parents from looking at the problems in their marriage. When the nest empties, the marriage remains, but the diversion does not. Buried issues can resurface. However, marital satisfaction often increases after the children leave. Sometimes couples need to take another look at their goals as they enter the second half of their marriage. It can provide an opportunity to become stronger or to drift apart.

If couples feel they are having a hard time re-connecting, some questions to consider may help locate the issues.

- How well do we know and understand each other? We have probably changed over time. Do we know each other's likes, dislikes, dreams and goals?
- How do we show our fondness and admiration for each other?
- Do we share everyday thoughts and happenings?
- Do we accept influence from each other?

- How do we solve our problems?
- How do we deal with issues in which we may never agree?
- How do we have fun together?

Other changes that may take place as the nest is emptied include career changes, caregiving shifts, plus our bodies are changing. Some career ambitions may have been put on hold during the childrearing years. One of the parents may want to focus on future career ambitions, while another parent may be winding down their career. Sharing those ambitions and desires with each other is a good place to allocate some focus.

Parents that look forward to their children leaving home as a time when they can do some things for themselves may also find that as their children are leaving, their own older parents begin to require more attention and care. A time of resting from being responsible for dependents may not come the way they had hoped it would.

Health issues begin to become a concern in the aging process. The empty nest stage sometimes coincides with these health changes. It's important to follow up with regular doctor appointments and to stay on top of potential issues in order to do well in all areas of our lives as we age.

Our relationships with our children are still important, but will need to change. If there are problems in a relationship before the children left, they are likely to remain until worked through. Accepting children as adults can be difficult for many parents. However, these relationships will remain forever, so it is important to nurture them through the changes both the parents and the children may be experiencing.

We often forget that when we are going through an adjustment, we are experiencing a normal transition in life. We need to remind ourselves that some difficulty adjusting to our children leaving home is expected. As nature reminds us, something as simple as an empty bird's nest carries a great deal of possibility.

For more on life's transitions, contact the Yates Center office of the Southwind Extension District at 620-625-8620.