

What Happens Now?

The Children Are Gone

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The Lesson – Part I

Ask the audience these questions:

If you came across an empty bird's nest in your neighborhood, would it be an encouraging sight, or one that would strike you as sad and lonely? Where are the birds, the young, the eggs? Is anyone coming back? Could they still call it home?

Encourage responses to the empty bird's nest from participants and list them on a flip chart, chalkboard, or overhead projector. As the group reflects on the responses, share some potential meanings such as: 1) loss; 2) normal progress; and 3) opportunity.

An empty nest can have different meanings. Some meanings center around *loss*. All at once the role of the parent has been lost, the excitement of youth has flown away, and dear companions are gone. Nests that were once the homes and nurturing ground of both young and old may now be quiet and without purpose. Do the parents still have anything in common with each other? Perhaps all the birds did not leave the way their parents had expected. Some may have left too soon and may need to return — hurting or damaged. A few of the birds may have been taken by predators.

An Empty Nest can also show that a phase has reached its *normal progression*, which can

Overview

The purpose of this lesson is to:

- Examine and discuss the stage of life that occurs after the children have grown and left home, often described as the “Empty Nest” stage.
- Explore the personal, marital, and professional issues that parents can expect to experience as they adjust to launching their children from the home.
- Initiate discussion on ways to overcome the stage's risks and capitalize on the opportunities.

Planning the Lesson

Teaching this lesson will be smoother if the you, the leader:

- Read through the entire leader's guide before giving the lesson, and ask yourself the same questions the lesson will ask the participants to consider.
- Prepare yourself by thinking about how participants might react to parts of the lesson and how you will handle their reactions.
- Have a flip chart, chalk board or overhead projector with clear transparencies to write down group responses.
- Have one copy of the evaluation form for each participant.



bring satisfaction. From the day a bird is hatched, we know that one day it will fly away. The nest has fewer occupants, and the walls that once contained laughter and the activity of young ones now contain silence.

A lack of activity in the nest can also mean the older birds now have *opportunities*. They are finally free from many of the nest's responsibilities. The duty of watching over the nest and its occupants has ended. The nest itself will still need some tending. The parents are now free to leave it for longer periods of time. They have the time to go out and look for items to spruce up the nest. Even though they have separate goals for the day, they could still be looking forward to joining up at the nest.

Just as an empty bird's nest can mean many different things, the transition for parents into this stage of life is full of possibilities. These possibilities range from loneliness to peace; feelings of aged uselessness, to the refreshment that comes from taking up old interests; and from exposing relationship conflicts hidden by the distraction of childrearing and freeing spouses to become better companions and lovers. It is not unusual for one person or couple to experience many different feelings. Sometimes these feelings are in conflict with each other. This is often the case when we go through any life change.

What is the Empty Nest Stage of Life?

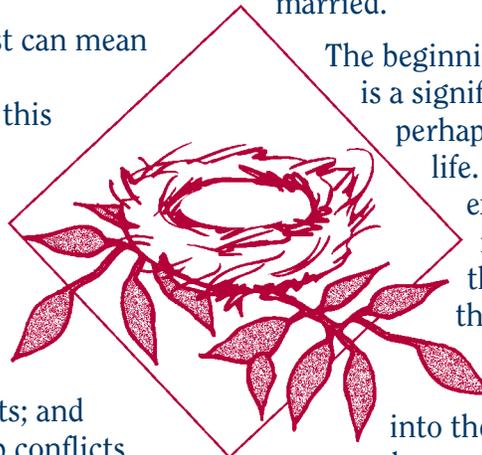
The empty nest stage is the time in the parents' lives when their last child has left the home.

Some think the term "empty nest" is too negative. They use the phrase "postparental stage" as the time when parents have raised their children and the children have left home.

Still others point out that parenting does not end with the launching of children. Parenthood enters another phase that requires the relationship to change and become shared by two competent adults. One of the adults is still the parent, and the other is the grown son or daughter. Thus, we never cease being parents — the role changes to match the appropriate time of life.

Ask the participants how nests become empty. What events usually lead to the empty nest?

Although children may leave home for several different reasons, the most common are to attend college, begin a career, or get married.



The beginning of the empty nest stage is a significant time of life and perhaps the longest segment of life. As the average life expectancy has continued to increase in the last century, the age of the parents after the children leave home has increased. Just as the birth of children and their entry into the home brought great changes, so does their departure from the home. Some changes may be positive, some negative, but there certainly will be change.

Part II

Assemble the participants into groups of four or five and ask each group to discuss and write down their ideas to the following questions:

*What beliefs and expectations do we have regarding the empty nest stage of life?
What sets this stage apart from other stages of life?*

Allow five minutes for group discussion and ask them to share their ideas with the group. Use the following information to summarize this part of the discussion:

The empty nest stage will mean different things for different families. There are some common issues that may occur.

- **Change in Roles or Loss of Roles.** We all feel better when we feel useful. The role of a parent is one of the most fulfilling roles anyone can ever have. It is natural to feel a void once that role is lost, but if parents have other roles besides being parents, they may not notice the loss as much. If they do not have other roles, they may need to seek them in order to feel complete in this stage of life.

However, some overdo their activities to avoid dealing with the loneliness of this transition. For people who have spread themselves thin with volunteer activities and parental duties, the start of the empty nest stage is a good time to re-examine their motives for future responsibilities. Are they taking on new roles they are interested in, or committing just to stay busy and avoid feeling empty?

- **Marital Issues.** Children often provide a diversion to the problems in their marriage. When the nest empties, the marriage remains — but the diversion does not. Buried issues resurface. Unhealed hurts or disappointments from the past return. However, marital satisfaction can increase after the children leave. Couples need to take a second look at their goals as they enter the second half of their marriage. If couples feel they are having a hard time re-connecting, the following checklist may help locate the problem:

- 1) How well do we know and understand each other? Do we know each other's likes, dislikes, dreams and goals?
- 2) How do we show our fondness and admiration for each other?
- 3) Do we turn toward each other rather than away from each other in going about our daily lives? Do we share everyday thoughts and happenings?

- 4) Do we accept influence from each other?
- 5) How do we solve our problems?
- 6) How do we deal with issues in which we will never agree?
- 7) How do we have fun together?

Some couples may find it easy to begin to make small and gentle changes in the way they respond to each other. Those couples that have a difficult time may need to seek professional help in nurturing their marriage.

- **Career Change.** The empty nest stage often coincides with a time when women who delay working during the child rearing years are now at the peak of their careers. Men's careers may start winding down at this same time. Researchers find that women often become more assertive in their middle years. While these changes may be different for each person, they need to be recognized as another change that requires adjustment. If focusing on future career ambitions is difficult, writing up a vision statement of what each one hopes to accomplish professionally, and sharing it with each other, may be a good place to start.
- **Caregiving Shifts.** Many parents look forward to their children leaving home as a time in their lives when they can finally do things for themselves. However, just as the children are leaving home, the parents find that their own older parents often begin to require more attention and care. Thus, a time of resting from being responsible for dependents may not come when they had hoped.
- **Bodies Change.** Health issues begin to become more of a concern. The empty nest stage often coincides with menopause in women and a decrease in sexual desire in men. However, some surveys say that sexual satisfaction can actually increase with age if the couple is doing well in other areas. *Anxiety* about decreased performance and satisfaction is





more of a sexual short-circuiter than age alone. If the physical ability to be intimate is a concern, a doctor may have some practical solutions or prescriptions that can be effective.

- **Relationships with Children.** They are still important, but will need to change. If there were problems in the relationship before the children left, they are likely to remain.

The task of accepting the children as adults is also difficult for parents. Research has shown that how the parents feel about the way children have left is usually more important to their adjustment than the fact that the children are no longer home. It is helpful to know whether the children have departed for good, or if the parents expect them to come back to the nest. In today's society, many children leave only to return again for financial or emotional reasons. Regardless of the situation, this relationship is likely to continue. Therefore, it is important to maintain this relationship through the changes parents and children will go through. Although the relationship may be good overall, acknowledging frustrations of the parent or child can strengthen this relationship.

Some Examples of How the Empty Nest Stage Can Affect Families.

Divide the participants into groups and ask them to think about the following situations. Write out each situation and make copies for each person in the group or list the situations on a flip chart, chalkboard, or overhead. Ask each group to name three potential risks for each situation and three potential opportunities. Have a spokesperson write down the responses and report back to the entire group. Allow 20 minutes for this activity. Discuss each case separately with the entire group, covering potential risks and opportunities.

Scenario #1 Beth and Dan

Beth was an elementary schoolteacher when she met Dan. When Beth had their first son, she stopped working to stay home with their son. They had three more children over the next six years. She had originally planned to go back to teaching after Amy, their youngest, went to kindergarten, but Dan made enough money from his business to keep them comfortable. She poured herself into her family. She not only ran the children back and forth from practices, performances, and sleepovers, but she cherished her role as a friend inside the home as well. Dan worked long hours at the business, and she enjoyed providing a restful, fun place for him to come home to. As her children moved into adolescence, she became a good friend, listener, and someone they could trust with their problems. Their youngest child, Amy, has just left for college. They had hoped she would go to a different college, and are a little worried about the guy she is dating. Dan's business is thriving, and he no longer needs to spend as much time at work. He has diabetes, but manages well. Now it's just the two of them.

Potential Risks:

- 1) Beth is losing roles that may have given her an identity.
- 2) They may have disappointment with the adult choices of their daughter.
- 3) Dan's diabetes could threaten his health, or have an impact on his ability to function sexually.
- 4) The empty nest stage may cause Dan to regret how much his work has caused him to miss out on time with the children.

Potential Opportunities:

- 1) Beth may have time to pursue teaching or other dreams she has put on hold to nurture her family.

- 2) With Dan's career demanding less, they may be able to do more things together and reconnect as best friends.
- 3) Dan may have time to take better care of himself physically as he has to work less.
- 4) Beth's friendships with her children may have paved the way for good relationships with them as adults.

Scenario #2 Marcus and Christie

Marcus and Christie met in high school and married after their first year of college, deeply in love and sure they were right for each other. Christie got pregnant unexpectedly after their second year of college. They both dropped out, planning to go back after a year. Marcus worked for a car dealership and Christie had a complicated pregnancy. The baby had health problems, and Christie needed to be with him full time for the first two years of his life. Christie then went to work as a secretary, putting the dream of college on hold to help the family. Neither ever returned to college. Marcus had an affair eight years ago, but they stayed together for the children and he has been faithful ever since. They seldom have sex and figure that trend will not change as they get older. He still works for the auto dealership, and she is still a secretary. It seems as if they always have been struggling to make ends meet. Their first son joined the military and their second has just left for college, where he received a scholarship. Finally, there is no one to support.

Potential Risks

- 1) After all of the financial struggles and the affair, their marriage may seem pointless now that the children are gone. It may be hard to see a reason to work on becoming close again.
- 2) Both may have stored up disappointments since they both sacrificed educational and career dreams for the family.

- 3) Lack of job satisfaction may become a problem.
- 4) Since they struggle with intimacy, both may have come to rely on the children for emotional support instead of each other.

Potential Opportunities:

- 1) They can rediscover the person they were each in love with when they married, before life threw them so many curveballs.
- 2) They can forgive for its own sake, not just to preserve a home for children.
- 3) If stress decreases, sexual intimacy may improve.
- 4) They can enjoy their children as adults and can be proud of their accomplishments.
- 5) If finances allow, they could be free to pursue new career ideas.

Scenario #3 Lynne

Lynne and her husband, Al, divorced twelve years ago when their daughter, Kelsey, was 8. Lynne is a florist and prides herself on balancing a successful business and strong relationships with her daughter, as well as her aging mother. Until recently, her daughter, Kelsey, has always lived with her and they are best friends. Now, at 20, Kelsey has just moved into her own apartment. She pays the rent from her salary as an assistant at Lynne's flower shop. Although Lynne has dated several men, she has never seriously considered remarrying. Her business and daughter prevented this. Kelsey may get engaged soon and it's likely she will move out of state. Lynne's father died when she was young, and now her mother is experiencing increasing pain from arthritis. Lynne is glad to help. She also looks forward to having more time to date with her daughter gone.

Potential Risks:

- 1) Since so much of Lynne's life is tied to





her daughter, losing her roles as boss, landlord, and constant friend may leave her struggling for an identity.

- 2) Even if she is ready to enjoy dating and pursuing more of her own interests, she may be pulled away by the needs of her own mother.
- 3) Now that she has survived being a single mom and launching her daughter into the world, some of the pain and romantic loss from her divorce may have time to resurface.

Potential Opportunities:

- 1) She may have time to pursue other enriching relationships, including dating.
- 2) Watching her daughter grow up and enter marriage may provide Lynne with satisfaction and hope.
- 3) She may have time to catch her breath and come to terms with some of the disappointments of her past.
- 4) She may try new ideas in her flower shop.

Part III

What can we do to help others going through this adjustment? Discussion will vary with the type of participants and their personal situations. Some will know relatives going through this stage, others will be experiencing it themselves. Some may have friends or co-workers who need help. As a group leader, keep in mind that you can help participants remember to be good listeners when those around them need to share. This does not mean that they need to agree, but that they give the other person an opportunity to be listened to without interruption or disrespect. During this final part of the lesson, if someone begins to share very personal information that makes the other participants uncomfortable, use your skills as a group facilitator to rephrase this information into a more general statement. For example, if

someone starts blaming a spouse for family difficulties, you could redirect the discussion by saying, “Many family situations can be difficult, and any time there are changes in the family, these problems can come to the surface. Family members can sometimes work out these difficult issues. Other families may need to seek professional counseling to get through the rough spots.”

Summary

Try to remember that people going through an adjustment often forget that they are experiencing a normal transition in life. Perhaps they thought the adjustment would never really pose a challenge. It is important to assure people that some difficulty adjusting to their children leaving home is to be expected. If you have friends and loved ones who are struggling to adjust, you may be able to help them identify the trouble by recalling the issues from this presentation. The *What Happens Now?* fact sheet contains information about the more common struggles and opportunities the empty nest stage can have.

Others in your community may know exactly why they are struggling, but they may not see the empty nest stage as a time of opportunity. Remind them that it is never too late to change, to forgive, and to come to terms with the life they have ahead. As we have seen, something as simple as an empty bird’s nest carries a great deal of possibility. This lesson may help provide an awareness of some of the difficult parts of this transition and ways to capitalize on the empty nest stage’s opportunities.

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