

College can leave parents empty

With summer coming to a close, families with young adults may go through major transformations

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The bags are packed and the bedroom's is mostly bare now: It's time to move the college freshman out of the house and into the dorm. As the bed of the truck is slowly filled with boxes full of toiletries, snacks and clothing, it becomes apparent that the once-young child is now grown up. And though they are about to embark on one of the most fulfilling journeys of their young lives, the parents are often left feeling empty inside.

The occurrence, common in parents with no children left at home, is called Empty nest syndrome.

It's the term most often used to describe the feeling of sadness or depression that a parent may feel after their children have left the home. It is most common for empty-nest syndrome to be brought on through children leaving for college, and sometimes through matrimony.

"Parents have to go through different stages in their relationship with their children," Behavioral Specialist Dwayne Dallum said. "When kids go off to college, parents are now in a role of adviser instead of director."

"It's hard for the family, and it's hard for the kids, too," he said.

Silverton mother of four Julie Moser is uncertain how her family will cope as her son Jeremyah Nelson leaves for Linn-Benton Community College in Albany.

"My family was gone for a few weeks this summer and it was awful," she said. "I mean, how do you cook for one versus six?"

"I need to find a hobby," she added.

Silverton father of three Jim Bruekner will bid his youngest child, Nathan, farewell as he attends Oregon State University in September.

Now, Bruekner is unsure how having all of his children out of the house will affect his family and himself.

"I don't know if I'll feel lonely with the house empty," Bruekner said. "I'm a coach [for Silverton High School], so we'll see if I have any extra time."

When students leave for college it often promotes a shift in focus for both parents and children, Dallum said. For instance, younger siblings may take on new roles (e.g., taking over an older sibling's bedroom), parents may find interest in new activities and children who have left may come home to discover that there is no real room left for them.

"It'll be strange with him gone – the grocery bill will go down and we've got plans to make his bedroom into an office," Moser said, laughing. "He knows we love him."

"Our home changed a little bit when our oldest left," Bruekner said. "We had three boys, and there was always one who wanted to be the alpha male, and there was less after he left."

Dallum describes the empty nest syndrome as a step in a family's life that most people are able to work through, without causing long-term havoc.

However, he emphasized, it's important that in order to avoid clashing during holidays and vacation time, parents and children alike must not slip into old roles of provider and dependent.

He said that while this friction may not be immediately apparent during short-term breaks like the few weeks during winter and spring, much of the tension is bound to come out during the summer, when many college students return to live in their parents' home for a few months before returning to school.

"All of a sudden, after being out on their own and independent for a year, kids come back for the summer as an independent working under their parents' roof," Dallum said. "Clashes occur because of curfew and routine. All of a sudden, you're asked to abide by the same rules as before, and there can be all kinds of problems."

When Bruekner's oldest son, Jacob, returned home, he brought more than himself.

"He brought all his dirty clothes home," Bruekner said, "and he came home every-other weekend."

Moser, too, knows what to expect when Jeremyah comes home for the weekend.

"He told us that he'll be coming home to stock up on food," Moser said of her son.

Dallum encourages students to do things for themselves when they return home, including laundry.

"Young adults can't be asking their parents to be doing things and providing the same services as before they left," Dallum said. "If they do, it's too easy to slip back into their former roles, and parents can end up dictating their child's actions rather than allowing them to grow as an adult."

“Young adults can get panicked because they want people to take care of them,” he said, “but they get over it, and most tensions between parent and child dissipate.”