

The Empty Nest Years

Achieving the long-term goal of raising and then launching a child (or children) is one of those milestones in life that can lead to surprising emotions. One day you might feel relieved to catch your breath after such an intense marathon and then the next day you miss the busyness—especially the ever-present relationships that went with it. Whether you are approaching, just hitting or deep into the empty nest season, you are likely experiencing a range of feelings that can leave you asking yourself “What next?” This would be a great time to take steps toward rediscovery in your life.

STEP ONE: Rediscover your mission

Psalm 90 gives empty nesters a sober reminder of the passage of time, but also a wise prayer for the Lord to “teach us to number our days aright” and to “establish the work of our hands.” A major segment of your life up to this point has been committed to serving and guiding your children. That faithful and daily focus on individuals within your home has been preparing you for broader service. In 1 Timothy 3:5, Paul asks the question, “If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?” Another way to see that passage is that those who have managed their families have learned a couple of things about how to care for God's church—how to love, forgive, guide, lead and encourage. Such characteristics developed in the last season, as well as the additional time and resources that often come with an empty nest, can equip you for a whole new world of opportunities to fulfill your mission during this exciting season of life.

STEP TWO: Rediscover your marriage

Some marriages don't last until the empty nest years either because of death or divorce. If your marriage has made it, you may feel like the tsunami of kids that swept in and out has left you needing to rediscover the person to whom you said “I do” so long ago. Proverbs 5:18-19 says, “May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.” After this intense stretch of parenting, how can you find fresh ways to rejoice in the marriage of your youth and to “be ever captivated” by your spouse? You may just need to reintroduce yourself (“Hi, I'm that guy who asked you out a couple of decades ago,” or “I'm that girl you met on the mission trip”) and start rediscovering some of your earlier passions and dreams.

STEP THREE: Rediscover your children

During earlier parenting stages, you had some fairly clear lines of authority and control, especially when it came to your house rules. Those lines blur as your children become independent—even if they boomerang back home for a season. Now is the time when your influence is built upon strong relationship rather than direct control. Your efforts will focus on coaching your children into self-sufficiency and into pursuing marriage and building families of their own. This season requires a lot of trust because “sideline coaching” is all you can offer rather than step-by-step direction. But this season also gives you a vantage point to see the time and effort you've invested into your children in a different light—especially as they begin to take ownership of the values you've tried to instill (Psalm 78:3-7) and watch them discover God's plan for their lives.

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GOING FURTHER - Resources

Recommended Books:

Half Time (by Bob Buford) Reaching midlife doesn't have to be a crisis. It is actually an opportunity to begin the better half of life.

Second Half of Marriage (by David and Claudia Arp) addresses eight challenges of the empty-nest years.