

living

health & wellbeing

Coping with an empty nest

Teenage sons and daughters will soon set off for college and university. An expert tells GABRIELLE FAGAN how parents can help their kids – and also survive the 'empty nest'.

IT'S a natural part of growing up that youngsters leave home and start their adult lives – either by going to college or university, or moving in with friends.

But what of the parents left behind? While some rejoice at their new-found freedom, others may, often secretly, struggle with the loss of their day-to-day parenting role, miss their child, and feel anxious about facing up to a new era.

"Feeling very upset and unsettled, as I did, is extremely common," says author Celia Dodd, whose researched the topic for her new book, *The Empty Nest: How To Survive And Stay Close To Your Adult Child*.

"Yet it's almost as though a taboo exists and talking about how much you miss your kids seems to be on a par with discussing hot flushes.

"A feeling persists that it's only a certain type of traditional housewife who's affected, and that modern women, who work, and are used to more control and more choice, are immune from feelings of loss.

"If you do feel shaken and fed up there's an implication that you're some kind of sado who needs to buck up and get a life."

Her investigation – seeking views from a range of experts including psychologists, psychotherapists, young adults and parents – also revealed that contrary to popular belief, fathers can be just as affected as mothers by their child's departure.

Dodd's own partner, Tom, 54, felt the change in his life deeply when their youngest child, Alice, 19, left for university.

"I was even working on a chapter on fathers and the empty nest, but I didn't realise my own husband was suffering," she admits.

"I'd already suffered a huge sense of loss when our eldest child, Paul, now 26, left, closely followed by Adam, 24, and was struggling with Alice's departure. But I was so caught up in my own feelings I'd overlooked Tom's.

Our modern tendency to be 'friends' as well as parents with our children, and more involved in their lives than in previous generations, may also heighten

the pain of an empty nest, Dodd, 57, believes.

"For years your children have been at the centre of your world, your life is run around them and suddenly you're in unknown territory," she says.

"It's a huge bittersweet transition where you welcome the fact that, after years of preparation, they're ready to step out into the world – but you can dread it as well. It's the recurrent war between the head and heart that makes the 'empty nest' so challenging.

But while it is a challenge, she says encouragingly, it also has the potential to be a new beginning for parents.

"Relationships with partners can improve without the distraction and stresses of parenting; people can forge ahead with interests that weren't possible either because of money or time when the children were around," she says.

"And just because children have moved on in their lives, it doesn't mean they will move away from you emotionally. They will still need your support and advice. The biggest challenge is forging a new direction for yourself while still being there for your kids when you're needed."

EMPTY NEST TIPS

Saying goodbye

■ When you first arrive at the hall of residence resist the temptation to suggest exploring the campus or local area together. Freshers may feel they've missed out on making friends if they're not around in those crucial first hours when rooms are being organised and beds made.

■ When it comes to saying goodbye, find a quiet place away from other students. Try not to cry in front of your child – it's their day. But don't beat yourself up if you can't help shedding a tear as kids like to feel they'll be missed.

■ Hide a card in your child's suitcase: it's a good way of expressing things you might be too choked up to say in person.

■ Staying nearby for a few hours or even overnight, in case they need you, is an option. But be prepared not to be needed. Leave your child to it if

they're settling in – the last thing either of you need is another jarring goodbye session.

■ Don't tell them you're going to be lonely or miserable without them. Letting them know how bad you're going to feel could be counterproductive because it may make them want to see you less, not more.

Surviving after they've gone

■ Face up to your feelings and recognise that you may be sad for a while. So have a weep over photos, sad films and then phone a friend and go have a treat! Doing undemanding things you enjoy and spending time with people who genuinely empathise can help in the early weeks.

■ Keep an open mind about how often your child will ring you or want to come home. If they're busy and don't have time to call frequently or visit, it almost certainly means that they're involved in student life and that you've raised a confident, independent young adult. Take it as a compliment, not a slight.

■ Don't be alarmed if he/she doesn't settle in the first few months. The first term can be difficult. Regular phone calls or a short visit from you may be all it takes to convince them it's worth battling homesickness. Send cards and small treats as a morale boost.

■ Draw up a list of events or social occasions so you have plenty to look forward to and are busy, and are less likely to over-worry about your offspring.

■ Don't rush in to big changes in your own life. Take an objective look at how to make the most of more time and energy. It's fine to cling on to comforting routines at first. Try not to lose your work/life balance. Filling empty hours by staying late at work or spending more time over home chores may be easy but won't help your mood. Investigate courses, evening classes or hobbies that could be a new focus in the months to come.

■ INFORMATION: *The Empty Nest: How To Survive And Stay Close To Your Adult Child* by Celia Dodd is published by Piatkus, priced £12.99.



CONTACT: Don't fret if your child doesn't call home as often as you'd like. It's a sign you've raised a confident, independent young adult