

Parents' guide Leaving the nest

The secrets to staying happy after your child heads off to university

Everything changes when a student leaves home – but it's not always for the worse, says **Kate Hilpern**

When she drove away, leaving her 18-year-old daughter Emma to begin a degree at the University of Nottingham last Autumn, Sue Dearden cried all the way down the M1. "I was surprised and overwhelmed by how sad I felt. I've always worked and felt that would prepare me, but when I called my husband to tell him I was heading home, I actually couldn't speak because I was so upset. I kept seeing in my mind the forlorn face Emma had when I left and I was a complete mess for days."

Sue had the added worry that her daughter wouldn't cope. "She is slightly dyslexic and struggled at school, so I was concerned that the academic focus of university would be too much. I did wonder if she'd be home within weeks. But she took to it like a duck to water and she also – to her delight – discovered all-night parties, cheap vodka and takeaway pizza. Meanwhile, I rediscovered my marriage. On Sundays, my husband and I would look at each other and smile because we knew we could do whatever we wanted. I had to send Emma lots of food, such as pesto and pasta, and got a call if something went

wrong, but I think we've all done remarkably well, given how we felt at first." The sadness parents can feel when offspring head off to college or university often comes as a shock, reports Glynis Kelly, child protection officer at Cornwall College. "For some it is akin to grieving, such is the intensity of the feeling of loss – and all relationships shift gear, causing some unfamiliar tensions as family members learn new ways of interacting with each other."

The first signs of parents' unexpected emotions may come as early as their child receiving confirmation of their university place, says Celia Dodd, author of *The Empty Nest: How to Survive and Stay Close to Your Adult Child*. "Or it may come as their room is tidied up, ready for their imminent departure. For others, it comes at the moment they say goodbye at the halls of residence. And for some, it's later still – perhaps when they see a mum with her child in the supermarket or they walk past a primary school."

Of course, you're proud of their achievements and share their excitement, but deep down it is easy to feel distressed that they're off. Mums may be going through the menopause, which makes them feel over-emotional anyway, or if they haven't worked and have invested everything in bringing up their



Sue Dearden, with her daughter Emma, says university has been 'the best thing for all of us' MARK SHENLEY/UNIP

children, they may feel. "What now?" "Dads, meanwhile, often feel they can't admit to their sadness down the pub or with their friends and so lack the support that mums often get," says Dodd.

Sue's husband, Andrew, says: "I'm really proud of how well Emma's done and feel happy for her that it's her time now, but it does leave a big hole in your life." For many parents, such as Sue and Andrew, the change has a positive side. For others, though, it has the opposite effect, says Christine Northam, a Relate counsellor. "When their child leaves home, parents may look at each other and realise there is nothing left. Alternatively, instead of sharing their feelings about what feels like the loss of their child, they go at each other," she says.

Parental splits are so common in that first term that university counselling services refer to the surge in requests for help after Christmas as the "January timebomb". In the past, couples might have stayed together for fear of being lonely. Now, though, with people living longer, they have plenty of time to acquire a new partner, a new home and sometimes a new family, in their forties and fifties.

Northam's advice for parents is to find new things to do together and to spend at least one evening a week away from the television or work nurturing

their relationship. Talk about the grief you're feeling, she adds. It is a sad time and must be acknowledged, otherwise it can leak out in more destructive ways.

"I'm sure I'll still be setting the table for my son when he's gone – I've been doing it so long," admits Gillian Thomson, whose son leaves for university this September. "I know it will take a while to sink in that he's not just away for a

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few days and I'm already feeling more emotional than I thought I would. It's bit like those feelings you have when they first start school, but it's so much bigger, because you're not going to pick them up at the end of the day. But my husband and I are very open about it with each other, which I think helps him too as he feels very much the same."

If you realise your relationship is beyond redemption despite all efforts,

manage the split carefully, recognising that this is a sensitive time for your child, says Northam. Even though they're officially adults, young people may need their family more than ever at this time.

Even parents who don't separate often make changes to their lives that can have an unsettling effect on their son or daughter. Some clear out all their things to make their room into a study, or rent out their room to bring in some extra cash to help pay for the university fees. These things can send out the wrong signals, cautions Northam. Young people still need to know they have a bolthole. The alternative can make them feel excluded and unwanted.

At the other end of the spectrum are the parents who become over-involved in their children's university careers, failing to let them experiment or make mistakes for themselves. So common is this "helicopter parenting", in which mums and dads hover close by, whether their children need them or not, that a few years ago Ucas gave in to pressure to allow parents to manage their offspring's university applications. More than 10 per cent of applicants now tick the box on the form which enables them to name a parent or guardian as their agent in the fight to get them a place at university. And it doesn't end there: students are increasingly phoning mum



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started university, she missed her intensely. "Even though I hated her coming in at all hours before she went off to university and was actually looking forward to her going in some ways, I felt like I'd been punched in the stomach when she went. I now find myself counting the days until she comes home for a weekend."

Focus on new beginnings, advises Chireal Shallow, psychologist for Greatvine.com. "Find new interests, occupy your time with activities that can be shared and those that can be done independently. You are now able to be more spontaneous than ever."

Rebecca Jones threw herself into work. "I had my daughter at 19, so my whole adult life was about bringing her up. When university came, my husband was working away and we were selling our home. Everything changed. But those changes – particularly starting up a new bed and breakfast – kept me busy and I think it kept my relationship with my daughter healthy. She didn't feel she had to worry about me. Now, we speak about once a week and have a more adult-to-adult relationship, which feels healthy and good."

In fact, she says, the challenge has now become her daughter's visits home. "I certainly don't begrudge her for it, but you do start getting used to a smaller family. Suddenly I find myself needing to buy a pack of four chops or thinking, 'We can't have a takeaway this weekend, because she doesn't like curry.'"

As costs escalate, more and more sons and daughters are deciding to study at a university near home and are not moving out at all. This can cause a new set of problems, says Suzie Hayman, spokesman for Family Lives, but they can all be resolved with negotiation. "Tell them they can't go on staying at home as a pampered child. They need to pay into the family budget or at least help with chores, in exchange for having some more space and privacy. Parents of these students should also encourage them to participate as much as possible in extra-curricular and fun activities provided by the university, so that they get as involved as possible."

Be particularly mindful of siblings, says Kelly. They're sometimes the worst affected when your child goes away to university, perhaps because they haven't anticipated the effect of an absent brother or sister as well as parents might have done. And if you're moping around, it may make them feel second best.

There are, after all, lots of positives to focus on. If your child is balanced, stable and friendly, you can be confident that he or she will manage, and you'll have extra space at home and less mess. There'll also be no more waking up at 6am when your child rolls in from a night out. "The house is quiet, you can choose what you want to watch on television and what you want to eat for dinner that night, there's no music booming from the bedroom upstairs," adds Hayman. "I can't believe that things are still in the fridge at night that were put there in the morning – and that when you tidy the house, it stays tidy," says Andrew Dearden.

Sue agrees. "University has been the best thing for all of us, and I think it's largely down to achieving that delicate balance of letting your child know they have your support, while allowing them to be independent. Emma and I are closer than ever, but without being in each other's pockets. Sometimes she'll just call me while she's walking across campus to say, 'Hi mum, how's life?' But she never feels she has to. It's lovely."

Linda Morris, 58, was surprised to find even a year after her daughter had

during lectures and asking her to attend careers fairs. Newcastle Business School at Northumbria University is not alone in its decision to run special open-day sessions for parents (in the past, parents didn't go to open days at all). A few years ago Huddersfield University set up a "family liaison officer" to feed information to parents round-the-clock about their children's progress. And at Keele University, more than half of all complaints relating to students come from parents.

Even graduate recruiters aren't free from the clutches of such parents. One large accounting firm reports that it has had calls from mothers, pretending to be their graduate children's secretaries, wanting to find out more about the job their children are applying for. Hewlett-Packard reports that parents have even tried to negotiate their children's salary or relocation package.

It's not helpful to micromanage your offspring's life when they are in their twenties, says Fiona Tracey, who works in student services at London Metropolitan University. If you feel yourself twitching to pick up the mobile phone to say "I want to be sure you don't offer my daughter an overdraft" or "my son won't be making it into his seminar today", don't. One new recruit at a transport company was overheard on the phone

to his mother saying: "I've got to go to London tomorrow and they haven't even told me how to get there." You really don't want that child to be yours.

By all means, find out what student services are available, says Tracey. "Encourage them to make contact with finance, counselling and careers advice services, among others. Students who come to London Met are often the first in their families to come to university, so it's not even as if parents can give advice from their own experiences."

But don't take over and certainly don't let your child come home too often. "The first few weeks of university are critical for social bonding and experiencing university life. Going home too frequently at weekends may mean the student is constantly adjusting and readjusting to being away."

On the other hand, don't beat yourself up for wanting to protect your child once in a while, says Sue Dearden. "Around six weeks in, they often wobble. It's exhausting to be constantly making new friends and socialising all the time. I've heard lots of mums say that's when they get the tearful calls. But I just let Emma know that even though she'd left home, she still had my emotional support."

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There's plenty of support and advice available to freshers

STUDENT SUPPORT

By **Pete Mercer**
Vice-president,
welfare NUS



For many parents, the day their child goes to university is also the first time they have left home.

Under any circumstances, that can be daunting, but when it takes them away from their home town, it can seem overwhelming, particularly at the moment you drop off your son or daughter and wave goodbye.

You child is also bound to be worried. But you can reassure them that they'll soon realise everybody else is in the same proverbial boat, everybody had the same anxieties before they arrived and they are all out to do the same thing: make friends and have a great time. In most cases, that's how the story goes. Drop-out rates in the UK are very low, and there's a range of university support services to guide your children and provide them with the help or advice they may need.

Most students have a brilliant time at uni, but the biggest and most-common mistake freshers make is being too embarrassed or ashamed to admit, for whatever reason, they aren't having "the time of their lives". Too many suffer in silence when they could be accessing the very services that could turn their experience around.

Every institution will have some form of wellbeing centre. Typically, this will house a counselling service of some description, where students can turn to if they need general emotional support, or for mental health problems or in the face of a crisis. There should also be a disability support unit within this that should respond to the academic and care needs of disabled students.

There will also be a financial support service based at the institution, in case your child encounters any problems relating to money. This will offer advice relating to student loans and bursaries, budgeting and debt. Should they be in desperate need of cash, there will also be a pot of money reserved for hardship funds, given out on a discretionary basis. Even if they don't qualify for an award, the institution could help in the form of an emergency loan, particularly where there are cash flow problems (for example, if their maintenance loan is delayed).

One way for your child to supplement their income is with a part-time job, in which case there might be a job shop in either the university or the students' union.

For those seeking academic advice, the university should also offer study support services. If they have doubts regarding their course, they can visit the careers service on campus. The vast majority of institutions also operate a personal tutor system, which could help with a range of issues as a first point of contact. Although tutors are usually only well-placed to give advice on a particular course.

Finally (and most importantly), freshers shouldn't forget about the students' union, which defends and extends the rights of students.

The pastoral agenda is well and truly at the heart of the unions. Many have advice centres to provide confidential and professional advice to students on a whole range of issues from accommodation and tenants rights to academic representation and from sexual health advice to debt consolidation.

Most importantly, advice centres are independent from the institution, which means they are perfectly placed to advocate on a student's behalf, give representation where necessary and deal with any disputes between them and the university.

