

Empty nest syndrome

By Jenny Gorevan

PARENTS FEEL ISOLATED

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, it seems many more 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. If you do feel shaken and fed up there's an implication that you're some kind of saddy, 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 children's departure.

Dodd's own partner, Tom (54) felt the change in his life deeply when their youngest child, 19 year old Alice, 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.

"I noticed he'd been grumpy, and generally under par for some time, and finally he told me how he felt. He said, 'For years it was 'Dad, Dad' all the time but now the children have gone and don't need me'."

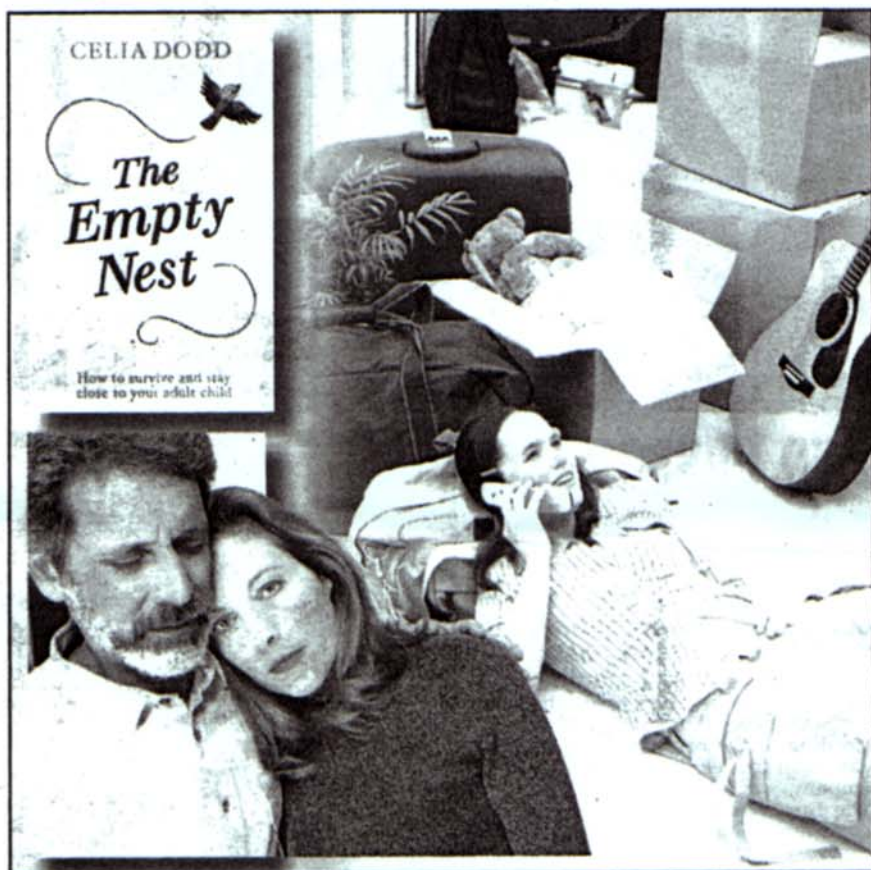
And, she points out, that today's fathers who are increasingly involved in childcare or may be househusbands, are likely to feel the pain of youngsters leaving even more profoundly.

"Men can still feel just as shaken and bereft as women, although they'll tend to hide their feelings out of embarrassment, perhaps not wanting to admit them even to themselves, or fearing they don't fit with a macho image."

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.



A NEW LIFE WITHOUT YOU: Students get caught up in their own world and parents often feel bereft, warns a new book (top left)

"There can be a feeling of being redundant, questioning 'what's the point of me now?' and an absence of routine which is scary.

"The period of adjustment and reassessment can take a while and it can help to regard it as psychologists do, as a period of mourning after a bereavement."

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

"Relationships with partners can improve without the distraction and stresses of parenting.

"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."

Here are Dodd's tips for those coping with children leaving home.

BEFORE THE BIG DAY

- The days leading up to your child's departure can be stressful because there's so much to sort out. Remember that your child may be nervous too.

- Quick, practical demonstrations of how to heat a pizza, boil an egg, or use a washing machine could be invaluable.

- Don't add to the tension with last-minute lectures, which are unlikely to be heeded, about healthy eating, sex and alcohol.

Instead, allow them to feel you trust them to manage their lives which will give them confidence, and assure them you're always there if they need advice. And never say, 'When I was your age...'

- 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.

- 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 counter productive because it may make them want to see you less, not more.

- 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.

- 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.

The Empty Nest: How To Survive And Stay Close To Your Adult Child by Celia Dodd is published by Piatkus Available now on Amazon.com