

lifefamilies

Was I right to let her fly the nest?

When his daughter snubbed university to move in with her boyfriend, Martin Barrow faced one of his biggest tests as a parent

As first homes go it has charm, I grudgingly admit. Set in the heart of the Sussex countryside, with horses grazing in the neighbouring meadow, what's not to like? I am about to point out that I can hear traffic from the main road at the bottom of the lane but, for once, I keep quiet. After all, my daughter, who is moving in, will quickly point out that she was brought up within earshot of the M23.

Natalie and her boyfriend Andy have

moved into a cottage on a farm with friends. They are renting a cosy room in the attic, up a narrow flight of stairs, into which they have squeezed a bed, a chest of drawers, bedside table and TV. Not much else fits but, it is plain to see, they don't really care. They are young, free and together, and Natalie is so, so happy and excited as she embarks on the next stage of her life.

Natalie is 17 and not long out of school; he is 19. We have let her go with barely a murmur of protest. At a time when most parents are still fretting over choice of friends, or whether to allow their daughters to attend a rock festival, or go on holiday with their mates, we have watched our youngest daughter, still four months short of her 18th birthday, pack her belongings into her car and drive away to join her boyfriend in their new home.

Are we anxious? You bet. Although she lives just five miles away, and visits regularly, we miss her terribly. It is certainly not what we had in mind when we used to mull over what sort of future our daughters would make for themselves: school, college, university, their first proper job, plenty of foreign travel. We know that there will be plenty of chuntering from disapproving family and friends about our irresponsible parenting, and who will feel ever so slightly smug when they hear the news.

In honesty, we are not sure ourselves that we have handled this situation as adeptly as we should. Maybe we ought to have put our foot down, been more assertive; persuaded her to wait a year or two, bribed her with an exceptionally generous allowance to stay at home; exiled her to live with long-forgotten relatives in darkest Peru. Where is that agony aunt when you need her? Dear Deidre, what just happened here? Yours, Befuddled of Bolney.

Back home, life carries on as if nothing has happened. We can hardly claim to be suffering from empty-nest syndrome, for we have another daughter and, as foster carers, children continue to be a big part of our lives. But Natalie's room already feels like somebody else's. Gone are the clothes and shoes and handbags and make-up, dirty plates, mugs and glasses that until yesterday covered every inch of carpet. Two of her posters have been left behind, of Paramore and Pink, who have fallen out of favour and don't merit a place in Natalie's new life. But what catches the eye is the collage of photographs that completely covers the wall above her bed — snapshots of her schooldays, of parties and chums, of her pony and the stables. The most recent pictures, of



Natalie still in uniform in the final days of school, and of her prom night, were taken just a year ago.

It seems like only yesterday that her teachers were summoning us to voice concern over her inability to do homework, and I feel deep sorrow that already it is all behind us.

My favourite picture is of Natalie riding Polly, dragging her recalcitrant pony over an impossibly high fence through sheer determination and willpower during a cross-country event. They were extraordinarily well matched: bloody-minded, sassy, full of life, in a world of their own as they galloped across fields in all weathers. Most kids would have given up on such a tricky horse but Natalie, as stubborn as her mule, brought her under some sort of control, hanging on for dear life as Polly twisted and turned and bucked and halted until she realised she had met her match. Battle resumed next time they saddled up.

That's Natalie... stubborn, resourceful, loyal to a fault and always ahead of her years. She outgrew school months before they were ready to let her go, and gave her teachers a hard

How to let them go

- **Make sure that your child knows you are there if needed, but try not to interfere.**
 - **If your child doesn't return your calls, don't assume that they don't want to hear from you. If they ring only when they want something, don't sulk: treat it as a good excuse for a chat.**
 - **If they don't come home a lot, it's usually a sign that they are settled and making friends.**
 - **Remember, as your relationship becomes more adult it will almost certainly improve.**
- Celia Dodd**
The Empty Nest: How to Survive And Stay Close To Your Adult Child by Celia Dodd is published by Piatkus, £12.99

time to relieve the boredom. Her college life lasted less than two months. When we complained that she was passing up the opportunity to go to university, I heard her quoting back many of my own complaints about tuition fees and the burden of starting your working life with a massive student debt. And, as she has pointed out more than once, neither of her parents went to university. We warned her about the deep recession and record levels of youth unemployment. She got a job within 48 hours.

My daughter is no wayward teen. She left school with a hatful of As and colleges queued up to offer her a place. She mucked out stables in return for riding lessons until she had her own pony, and has worked every Saturday and Sunday, doing washing-up and menial jobs in a pub, for as long as I can remember. She now holds down two jobs, working for an insurance company on weekdays (alongside older colleagues with good degrees) and at a pub restaurant at weekends, where Andy is the chef.

She passed her driving test less than

five months after her 17th birthday, and saved enough money to buy her own car. She has been paying her own way for a couple of years now; inevitably, financial independence brings with it the right to decide how to live your life. She has always been in a hurry to get on.

Had she asked our permission to move in with Andy, we could have said no. She would have moved in anyway. She has fallen in love with a hardworking and decent lad from the village who already seems like part of the family. To see them together, as a couple, enjoying their company, looking on as they grow into one other, is strongly life-affirming. So she's 17: I think many older couples will look at them with a wistful sense of what they once enjoyed.

It has certainly made me think back to the day when we moved in together. Lorna gave her parents a few days' notice; I didn't tell mine for weeks. At first we shared a room even smaller than Natalie's, with a view over the railway on the outskirts of Portsmouth. We were woken up before dawn every morning as the first goods train rattled

“**Maybe we should have put our foot down, been more assertive**

by, shaking the house to its foundations. I had no job, no money, no qualifications, no game plan. I was 21, she was 18. This was during the recession of the early 1980s, with three million people on the dole. So, a little older but certainly no wiser than Natalie and Andy.

In fact, I rate their chances of staying the course higher than our own were at the time. Somehow we defied the odds. So, I suspect, will they. In Natalie I see much of the younger me, although she is brighter, wittier, more considerate, and generally more certain about her place in life. She has none of the anger that drove me through the early years.

So why the regret, the uncertainty? If I'm honest with myself, it's all about me, not Natalie. There I was thinking that we had another four years, maybe five, before she would make her own way; plenty of time to do some travelling, watch movies, get drunk, embarrass her at family parties. To spoil her on her birthday and bore her senseless with my words of fatherly wisdom.

But as I say, she's in too much of a hurry for all of that.