

Dads Get Down Too:

An empty nest isn't just for mothers anymore

By Mary O. Parker

Dinnertime was unusually quiet in the Jacobson household the day Kemp "Jake" Jacobson's daughter Mara left for Oregon State. "When she took that first step out of the nest," Jacobson says, "It felt like a part of me was gone. And a piece of our family unit was gone too."

As time went on, says the Beaverton dad, "I found myself missing her unique personality, her sense of humor. It was the little things I wanted to share with her and couldn't. You know, the stuff of our daily lives."

Alex Gregory, a Lake Oswego father, can relate. "One thing that struck me when my son left was just how many things we did together. I really missed doing things with him, even stuff around the house."

According to Portland therapist Dr. Mark Gundy, Ph.D, reactions like Jacobson's and Gregory's aren't unusual. He explains that contrary to what many believe, fathers are affected just as much as mothers when the kids leave home.

He explains that when children fly from the nest, a father's sense of home and family dramatically changes. As a result, he says, "This phase in a man's life can create feelings of loss and make it important to go through a time of grieving."

Did I Do a Good Job?

For many fathers, part of that grieving process includes revisiting the past and reflecting upon the role they played while their children were growing up.

Jacobson says that as the days without Mara continued, "I would ask myself 'Did I do a good job?' I wondered if she would know what to do when she was confronted with certain situations. I hoped I had prepared her well enough."

Sean Howard of West Linn also found himself looking back over the job he'd done raising his two children. "I thought about times I got upset about things like their rooms being a mess, and it made me wonder how they'll remember me. Will they say, 'Dad was really fun and silly sometimes but he sure lost his temper a lot?'"

"I wish I would have handled my own frustrations better," he adds. "But you can't take that back."



Such questioning is to be expected, say experts, since dads spend so much of their children's lives focused on providing for them instead of the hands-on parenting many may have preferred.

Anne Allanketner, a Portland-based family and marriage counselor explains, "Men typically have spent their adult years as breadwinners. They've spent those years overriding their physical and emotional needs in order to support the family."

She also says that reflecting on the past is a natural part of midlife experienced even by those who aren't fathers. However, for fathers it's intensified by the fact that when their children become adults it makes the finiteness of time indisputable.

Fathers realize like never before "that the journey of life is time-limited." Such realization is beneficial, she stresses, "because it jettisons you into a new stage, and that next stage involves the beginning of wisdom."



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A Lot to Learn

When Mara left, Jacobson learned after all those years of teaching her that he had a lot to learn. First of all, he says, “I had to learn to back off. That’s definitely a learning process. I would think, ‘I need to call and check in, tell her to make sure to get the oil changed in her car.’ But I’d have to remind myself to step back.”

Gundry points out that it can be difficult when fathers realize they aren’t needed in the same ways they were before. Their role has changed, and they find themselves wondering what role they should be playing now.

“I think dads tend to do more of the providing and be the secure presence for their children,” Howard says, “Heck, my daughter is 18 and I’m still killing spiders for her. That’s the sort of role I’m used to playing.”

He says that while moms can say to themselves, “I did my job, I nurtured them and raised them,” a father’s job as a protector doesn’t have such clear ‘before’ and ‘after’ delineation. He asks, “When you’ve always been the great protector and your children are venturing out into the big bad world, how do you protect them now?”

“I worry about their future. I worry about boyfriends, the world. I can’t protect them from all of that so I’m at a bit of a loss,” Howard says. “I want everything to be fixed for them, and I couldn’t even do that when they lived at home. How can I do that when they leave?”

Jerry Neuburger, an inner-city Portland father of two, agrees. “When my children left I wasn’t so worried about them. But I was worried about the cruel world out there.” Being the protector makes it especially difficult for dads to step back and let their sons and daughters navigate the “big bad world” without them.

Gregory states that for him learning to step back has been a “tricky transition” and one in which “I’ve had to learn how to allow my children their independence and not to micromanage.”

Jacobson says it was that way for him as well. “It’s really hard sometimes not to stick your nose in there, but it’s important that you let them feel their wings while making sure they know you’re there to support them when they call.”

His advice? “Try to overlook the small mistakes they’re going to make and be supportive of their decisions.”

Gregory suggests learning to “bite your tongue” and says, “When it comes to advice, wait until you’re asked instead of volunteering.”

What Now?

When his kids left, Gregory found himself asking, “What now?” Allanketner says that Gregory’s question is a common one as dads find themselves not only redefining the role they play in their children’s lives, but also redefining many aspects of their own lives.

“One of the best things a man can ask himself at this stage is ‘What do I need emotionally from my partner, children and friendships?’ The idea that he is dependent on others, that he has emotional needs, may seem foreign to him, possibly even frightening. His needs for tenderness, appreciation, safety and rest may have been subsumed in the whirlwind of family and career.

“This,” she explains, “includes his expanding relationships with his now adult children. They may have left the nest but will be returning for lifelong adult friendships.” During this time, she stresses, dads need permission from themselves and others (especially their wives), to “slow down and think through their deeper needs. The male gift for action, which was so valuable at earlier stages, can derail a man’s midlife and empty nest process if he acts unconsciously.

Gundry agrees and adds that the empty nest transition “creates an empty space that, while painful at times, can make room for other aspects of a man’s personality and interests to grow, sometimes after long years of neglect.”

“That empty space,” he says, “can become a potential creative space, where a man can engage unlied aspects of his life and find new ways to love and devote himself to his life.”

Mary O. Parker is a mother who knows first hand about an empty nest; her 18-year-old son Nicolas not only left the nest, but flew all the way across the Atlantic to Italy in doing so.



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