



## When the last child leaves home



Most parents experience a sense of loss when their child leaves home. I certainly did when my first two children started university, so it is hardly surprising that when we waved goodbye to our youngest child in the car park outside his hall of residence last week that there was a lump in my throat.

The arrival of our eldest child and the departure of our youngest were both milestone events. When our daughter was born our lives were transformed dramatically; the anticipation of her arrival and then her very existence changed us from rather self-centred, career seeking young adults into doting parents. But the recent departure of our youngest child has brought a similar, enormous change into our lives. Our oldest child may have made us parents, but the departure of our youngest child has made us 'empty-nesters', although I'm not sure I particularly like that term very much!

When our older children were getting ready to leave home there was a realization that this would be their last birthday at home, their last school report, or their last parent's evening at school, but when the countdown began for our youngest child I was aware that we wouldn't ever be going through some of these things again with anyone. I watched the school bus drive through the village last week and for the first time in twenty-two years we had no child sitting on its seats. Through all the years of bringing up our children, with all the joys and challenges, it is the departure of our youngest child that marks the end of an era. This is the child who had to be taken along to the activities of his older siblings, who was rarely the first to do anything in our family and benefited from hand-me-down clothes and toys. He is the one who was left behind and watched as his older brother and sister left home and found their place in the adult world and watched me miss them and adjust to the gap they left behind. Just as his sister's arrival did twenty-six years earlier, his departure seems to have changed everything.

Being the last child to leave, our son's departure has meant that it has suddenly gone very quiet at home. I realised yesterday afternoon that I could hear the fridge, and I hadn't been aware of it ever really making a noise before! I went to the shops this morning and walked past the large value packets of pasta that I used to buy to fill my boys up after their football and rugby matches. I won't have to worry about getting sports kit through the wash quickly or drying out wet football boots because they have been left caked in mud in some discarded bag by the back door, or listen for a key in the door or footsteps on the stairs late at night to reassure myself that each family member is home safely. I'm sure I'm not alone in feeling rather sad, but I do know that there is a new chapter about to begin, and that we will adapt to a life with no children at home.

With the departure of each of our three children, part of me wanted to hang onto their childhood and I found myself reminiscing about some of the amusing things they had done when they were little. At the same time I know it is inevitable that they 'fly the nest' and am proud of the independent and accomplished young people that they have become and am pleased and excited for them. I am also looking forward with anticipation to enjoying some time for ourselves for a change as we start this new chapter of our lives. It can feel confusing to acknowledge these different kinds of feelings all at the same time. Conversations with other people, in the last few weeks before my son left, just reminded me of the loss I had felt when his older brother and sister had gone, but I also felt a degree of embarrassment at acknowledging somewhat sentimental feelings about the end of an era of bringing up my children. I found myself glossing over what I really felt about the whole situation with a cheerful smile saying, 'I know he will be absolutely fine' - which of course he will!



Now that all of the children have gone, my husband and I have to work out how to approach this new chapter in our lives. We have devoted a lot of time, energy and prayer into equipping our children to stand on their own two feet, and now we have let them go. Having now waved goodbye to each of them, we have realised the importance of taking our lead from each child regarding how much contact to have. They know where we are if they need us and some will talk more than others. It means being sensible about not being in touch too much by phone, text or email - or 'spying on them' on social media! It also means being pleased to hear what they've been doing without needing to know everything, or asking for too much detail just to reassure ourselves that they are looking after themselves properly. They need to settle into the pattern of their new life as much as we have to work out how to do things differently at home without them. I read somewhere that your child wants to know they will be missed – but not too much! It is obviously not a good idea to let them know if you're having a bad day and how empty life seems without them, but conversely it is also not wise to keep mentioning how much you are enjoying your newfound freedom or go into too much detail about your plans for their bedroom now that they are not occupying it! I have recently spoken to a few of the parents of my son's friends who have all acknowledged, hard as it seems at first, that this is an opportunity to develop our own lives again. A few honest souls have admitted to sometimes feeling rather useless or redundant now that the hands-on parenting years are over; but all of us who have recently experienced these kinds of feelings agreed on one thing, that it will get better and we will get used to it in time - and just as we are adjusting to a different pattern to our days, before we know it they will all be back for Christmas, no doubt with exciting stories to tell, as well as the inevitable bags of dirty washing!

Claire Sillett