

As Kids go to College, Empty Nest Syndrome for Parents Not so Bad After All

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(PhysOrg.com) -- It's that time of year when parents are buying college supplies and textbooks, while their children are packing their bags and preparing to leave the 'nest' for the first time.

The parent-child relationship will change as parents learn to adapt to newly independent children, but a University of Missouri researcher has found few differences in the way mothers and fathers felt and that many of the changes were positive, despite the perception that mothers in particular fall apart and experience the "empty nest syndrome."

"As children age, direct caretaking and influence diminish, and children are often seen by their parents as peers with whom they have continuing relationships," said Christine Proulx, assistant professor of human development and family studies in the College of Human Environmental Sciences. "Although our results suggest these patterns of change and continuity differ by parent and child gender, our analyses suggest important similarities among mothers and fathers within the same family."

In the study, parents were most concerned with firstborns' independence, time spent together and role patterns. Proulx found that fathers and mothers reported similar changes in parent-child relationships during their children's movement into young adulthood. Both fathers and mothers reported differences in independence/maturity of their children, closeness/openness in their relationships, contact/time spent together and changes in role patterns.

Parents reported relating more like peers and having more adult-like interactions with their young adult children than in prior years. Other parents reported acting more like mentors and giving advice to their children rather than demands.

Some of the things that remained the same in the parent-child relationships were parents providing financial assistance and continuing to be mentors. Few parents reported changes in emotional support to their children.

"The analysis suggests that mothers and fathers in the same families in our study rarely reported divergent experiences with their young adult sons and daughters," Proulx said. "Overwhelmingly, the examination of mothers' and fathers' responses revealed similarities in their experiences as parents to their young adult children."

The researchers interviewed 142 sets of parents with firstborn young adult sons and daughters. The study was published in the Journal of Family Issues.

Provided by University of Missouri

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