

Feathering your empty nest

It's the moment you have been awaiting for 20 years – no more loud music, dirty socks left on the bathroom floor and finally the fridge remains well-stocked for days. The adult kids have flown the coop.

So how do you feel now?

For most parents it may be a time of mixed feelings. For 20 years you have been carefully guiding, balancing the letting go with the tight leash, and now they have moved out to live independent lives and don't need you any more.

At this point some parents will be celebrating, while others will be biting their nails and wondering if the "kids" will survive in the big cold world outside the home.

Don't make the mistake of thinking your job as a parent is over – that's a role you will take to the grave. But as with many areas of employment, the job description changes over time, so it is with the job of parenting adult children. You do still have a role to play in their lives, but it is different from when they were your total responsibility as children and teenagers.

The way to prepare for the big day when the young ones flee the nest is to start planning and thinking several years ahead. Some parents make the mistake of thinking they will make this transition in their parenting roles once their child has left home.

In the final years of secondary school, kids start to develop a lot of independence. They have their own agenda and are not always around. This is a natural development and a good thing, as they are out discovering life.

It's also the start of parents weaning themselves. If the parent can view this stage as exciting and enjoy the journey, it will make for a much easier transition once the kids really do leave home.

This is also the time when you can establish the possibility of remaining close to the kids and having lots of contact with them once they move away. Family relationships can still be good and close without everyone needing to live under the one roof.

Of course, once the kids have moved out, there is a list of things not to do.

Turning up on the doorstep with a basket of cookies, supplies for the week and a garbage bag for collection of dirty washing is not really the way to go.

Yes, you'll be worried they will run out of money (and they probably will) and starve, but you just have to let some of these things happen because it's a learning experience for everyone.

A good way to parent your adult child is to trust them and set up a time to meet them for coffee. Keep in touch with emails and phone calls, but make sure it doesn't look as if you're checking up on them.

It's much healthier to ring with an interesting piece of information about someone you both know, rather than ring with a barrage of questions about whether they are eating right or sleeping right (and on this one, ignorance might be bliss).

The bottom line is that if kids have grown up feeling valued, respected and feeling that their parents believe they are well-equipped to cope independently, they will want to maintain links with the family because good basic relationships have been established.

Parenting an adult child means not giving advice, but stepping back and standing by to support them if and when they ask for it. It's their journey, not ours, so try to see things through their eyes.

It's not easy to let go and stand back when we love them so much, but with a little self-discipline we can get the balance right.

Survival tips

- **Start preparing for your adult child's independence when they are still teenagers.**
- **Let them know there's no problem with still being part of the family, even though you won't all be living under the one roof**
- **Don't smother them with concern - trust that they will survive, but be standing by to support them when necessary**
- **Don't turn up on the doorstep with casseroles. Arrange to meet them for coffee and gossip instead.**