

Marriage Milestones

WHEN THE LAST CHILD LEAVES HOME



Most couples with children invest sixteen, eighteen, twenty, even thirty years raising them to be confident, competent and independent, and one day they are ... and they leave.

They leave to further their education, or career, or for a myriad other reasons. However much we applaud their transition to adulthood, however much pride we may take in their achievements, their going leaves, or will leave, a large space in our daily lives. When the last child leaves home it is not just that we miss them (and we do). Their going signals a change in life as radical as when the first one arrived, even if it is a relief in some ways.

PRECIOUS INVESTMENT

Empty nesters, that is what they call couples whose children have all left. The more we have invested in their future, the more we have cared for them and nurtured them, the greater the gap they leave when they go. This stage of life is a time of great possibility for marriage, but like every stage it benefits from planning and preparation.

We probably planned fairly carefully for the arrival of our children. We recognised that we would take time to adjust to this new stage in our lives. There were lots of places to find help in coping with new parenthood too, but there seems to be little help for the trauma of the 'empty nest'. After all, an empty nest is what we are aiming for; that is what all the education, advice and planning throughout the growing years of our children was all about. Our homes may be emptier than we expected. Our children's friends will no longer drop in. A whole generation, a whole social structure, that might have been enriching our lives, will suddenly melt away.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THIS STAGE OF MARRIAGE

- **Recognise that you will both have some grieving to do.** Grief is an appropriate emotion, however glad you may be for the sake of your children that have left, and however many plans you may have for the two of you now that you are alone again. When a child leaves home they will be missed.

- **Respect the grief of your spouse.** Avoid giving objective assessments, such as: 'at least we can get into the bathroom in the mornings!' in response to subjective, feeling, statements, such as 'I didn't realise how much I would miss her'.
- **Talk together about your children,** but avoid making them the sole topic of conversation.
- **At some time consider changing your child/children's room** into something else; a guest room, hobby den, or office, perhaps. Avoid turning their room into a kind of shrine to their childhood. Encourage them to sort out their belongings as a part of the 'rite of passage', at an appropriate point, as much for their sakes as for yours.
- **If one of you has been at home as a homemaker and not worked at anything else, consider a new career.** Many people are now re-launching their career at 40, 50 or even older - or changing careers completely! Alternatively, investigate voluntary work.
- **If possible, plan to do something specific together.** Look at clubs and adult education to see if there is something you would both enjoy.
- **Recognise that this is a new stage in your lives and make some positive plans for yourselves as a couple.** Talk together about things you can do. Share your dreams for your marriage.

FINALLY

Most of us will have the car serviced regularly (if only for the MOT). What about marriage? Just as a car that is neglected is more likely to breakdown on the road, so is a neglected marriage more likely to end in divorce. How about giving your marriage a service?

To meet this need various marriage enhancement courses have been produced. **See the page "Marriage Enhancement" on the Marriage Resource website www.marriageresource.org.uk** . These courses are usually either provided by organisations on a residential weekend or a midweek break, or on a series of weeknights usually by a local church, both for their members and for non-members. These courses are designed to make any marriage better, whether or not there are problems. Do give your marriage a service – the benefits last for years!