

Is empty nest best? Changes in marital satisfaction in late middle age

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The phrase "empty nest" can conjure up images of sad and lonely parents sitting at home, twiddling their thumbs, waiting for their children to call or visit. However, a new study, reported in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, suggests that an empty nest may have beneficial effects on the parents' marriage.

University of California, Berkeley psychologists Sara M. Gorchoff, Oliver P. John and Ravenna Helson tracked the marital satisfaction of a group of women over 18 years, from the time they were in their 40s to when they were in their early 60s.

The results of this study revealed that marital satisfaction increased as the women got older. Marital satisfaction increased for women who stayed with the same partners and for women who remarried.

What was most striking about the results was that women who had made the transition to an empty nest increased more in marital satisfaction than women who still had children at home. Even more interesting, it was shown that an empty nest does not increase levels of marital satisfaction simply because the parents have more time to spend with each other. Instead the results suggest that women whose children had left home enjoyed their time with their partners more compared to women whose children were still at home. In other words, it was an increase in the quality, and not the quantity, of time spent together once children moved out, that led to increases in marital satisfaction.

Gorchoff is quick to point out that the results do not suggest that all children should be sent away to boarding school for the sake of their parents' marriage. Rather, she notes that "this research does suggest that women should not wait until their children leave home to schedule enjoyable time with their partners."

Source: Association for Psychological Science

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