

Marriage improves after kids fly the coop, study suggests

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(PhysOrg.com) -- So much for the empty nest blues. A University of California, Berkeley, study that tracked the relationships of dozens of women has found evidence that marriages improve once the kids have flown the coop.

The study, conducted by UC Berkeley's Institute of Personality & Social Research, followed the marital ups and downs of some 100 women through early marriage, child-rearing and, in many cases, divorces, remarriages and domestic partnerships.

Researchers gauged participants' levels of satisfaction with their marriages at ages 43, when most had children at home; 52, when children were starting to leave home; and 61, when virtually all of the women had empty nests. Overall, the study found, participants' marriages improved because of the quality of time they spent with their spouses after their children left home.

"The take-home message for couples with young children is, 'Hang in there,'" said UC Berkeley psychology Ph.D. candidate Sara Gorchoff, who spearheaded the study published in the November issue of the journal *Psychological Science*.

While the women reported feeling happier in their marriages once their children left home, they did not note an increase in their general sense of life fulfillment, suggesting that post-empty-nest improvements are specific to marital relationships.

When asked by researchers how their relationships had changed, one 61-year-old study participant explained it this way: "Twenty years ago, we were in the battle of the children. Today, we can enjoy one another for who we are." Another told researchers, "Once the kids grow up... there's some of that stress removed... that responsibility removed, so things are a little more relaxed."

These same participants, all born in the late 1930s, were first studied in 1958 when they were seniors at Mills College in Oakland, Calif., by UC Berkeley adjunct professor emeritus Ravenna Helson, a co-author of this latest study. While college-educated, the women reflect a wide range of professions, incomes and schedules for starting families.

They also represent trends typical of their generation in that 84 percent married before age 25 and 30 percent divorced by age 45. In some cases, the increased marital satisfaction they found later in life was due to finding more compatible partners after divorcing. Overall, however, the study found the marital satisfaction of women who stayed with the same partners increased significantly while the boost in contentment for those with new partners was not notable.

As for how the study's findings can benefit married couples: "Don't wait until your kids leave home to schedule quality time with your partner," said UC Berkeley psychology professor Oliver John, a co-author of the paper.

Next, Gorchoff and John plan to study marital satisfaction in a sample of men and women of different ethnic, educational and socio-economic backgrounds. The Mills College study group will continue to be tracked by UC Berkeley psychologists and other researchers.

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