



## Life After BRITISH INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL RIYADH

### How to cope when your child goes away to College ~ The Empty Nest

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You've waited almost 18 years for this day. Your son or daughter is proudly off at college. You've been through the talk about independence, have ensured there's enough funds in her debit card account to start her off, and have unloaded your car of the extra-long twin sheets, flip-flops for the community showers, and the big-store-size bottle of aspirin.



The settling-into-college period was eventful, busy and a little chaotic, so much so that you hadn't had time to acknowledge the nagging pit in your stomach or the fact that you've been hallucinating about her riding a tricycle or losing her very first tooth for the past week now.

"Often change affects us emotionally, before we can handle it logically," explains John Baker, a leadership expert and author of the newly released book, *READY Thinking - Primed For Change*. "Recognize that you will need some time." Baker's advice is to let the emotions flow - express what you're feeling, and surround yourself with support: family, friends, perhaps someone who is experiencing a similar event with the departure of their child. And when those waves of nostalgia wash over you? "Take solace in the future changes you will experience in you child's life and how the miracle of growth will continue," he says.

### Hovering over the (empty) nest?

Pegina Echevarria was shocked to feel inklings of empty-nest syndrome when her daughter left for school. "I had written a five-year plan for my professional life so that when she left for college, I would be able to take advantage of the freedom of the empty nest." What Pegina didn't count on was how hard it would be for her to let go. She soon found herself over-parenting from afar.

"I struggled when I received the phone calls about the nightmare roommate, the way she perceived people treating her and how difficult it was for her to get help for her emotional distress," she recalls. "Super Mom took over: I called her resident advisor, the dorm direction, the first-year dean. I had always prided myself on raising independent kids. For years I looked forward to my freedom, then look at me!"

Pegina pushed past her 'helicopter parent' status by putting things in perspective. "Understand that your child will cry, whine, suffer and grow." Rediscovering yourself and reconnecting with your spouse definitely helps. "Identify your own dreams and go after them. In Pegina's case, it was taking up swimming, adding sightseeing tours to her business trips, and taking classes with her husband.

## Ditch the "Mom" label

According to Baker, one of the best methods to deal with empty-nest syndrome is to "re-label" yourself. "You've been consumed with being a 'parent.' Now you can re-connect as a 'spouse,' re-engage as a 'friend,' reinvigorate your career as a 'professional.'"

Marsha Sims, a single mom with three sons in college, started to look for things she enjoyed outside of children, specifically goals she'd buried from the before-the-kids days. "I always wished I knew how to dance, I wanted to continue piano lessons, and I wanted to learn how to cook better. Now that my sons are all grown, I dance three to four nights a week, practice the piano daily, and took some raw food preparation classes."

Silvana Clark and her husband, whose 18-year-old daughter is heading to Baylor University this fall, plan to cope with empty nest by running away, RV and all. "We love traveling, so we'll simply travel full time for the next few years. We're going to rent out our house and simply hit the road. There's really nothing to hold us in this community where we've lived for 25 years. Our daughter can track us down wherever we are in the country during her breaks."

## A digital hug

Many parents have turned gone digital to rid themselves of impending empty-nest depression. For Mary McPhail whose daughter Mackenzie just finished her freshman year at Emerson College in Boston, Mass., iChat was a techno-blessing. "Even though we were 1,000 miles away, I could 'see' my daughter in her dorm room and with her friends, check out her new haircut, see her finished school projects, and assess her mood. Seeing each other is key to not missing each other (too much, anyway)."

Margaret King, who has two daughters at colleges more than two hours away, chuckles at the term 'empty nest.' "At first I thought that I would really miss them, but with cell phones, text messaging and email, who knew they were gone?!" she exclaims. "Really, I did miss them, but we did develop a new kind of relationship with our children." Margaret and her husband now look forward to September when they are free to do what they want, when they want. "Don't get me wrong, we love our children and they are our first priority, but they need to make their own mark on the world."