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## Learning to Live (and Love) in an Empty Nest

By Bonnie Rochman

This we know: first comes love, then comes marriage, then comes baby in a baby carriage. But what happens when baby grows up and moves out? The answer, increasingly, is parents cough up cash to attend an empty-nest workshop.

There's a growing cottage industry of experts who contend that sending kids off into the great wide open deserves at least as much attention as preparing to have them in the first place. Community centers and churches around the country are tuning in to the problem and hosting seminars in which parents try to reignite their relationship and figure out how to move forward as a twosome. Marriage therapists Claudia and David Arp call this stage "the second half of marriage."

The run-up to freshman year in college may be so exhausting (hip-hop lessons! swim team! traveling soccer leagues!) that parents feel they hardly know each other — and, sometimes, themselves. "One of the most common things we hear is, 'We're sitting at the breakfast table, just the two of us, and we don't know what to talk about,' " says David Arp, who led an empty-nest training session with his wife last month at the annual Smart Marriages conference in Orlando, Fla. Carmen Hough, 55, who this spring completed a 12-week workshop in Jonesboro, Ga., puts it more bluntly: "You only have 18 years with your children. Then it's you and your husband, and if he's not your best friend, it's going to take an adjustment."

That's where the Arps' book *10 Great Dates for Empty Nesters* comes in. It encourages couples to go on dates where, in lieu of small talk, they work through exercises in the book. (The original *10 Great Dates* is being used at, among other places, North Carolina's Fort Bragg, where deploying soldiers are given a copy to help keep them connected to their sweeties, albeit via video-conferencing.) The dates are designed for couples to hash out hot-button issues — including money, sex and anger — or to

negotiate new household roles that take into account chores the kids used to tackle.

Forging a fresh identity can be particularly rough for stay-at-home moms, says Natalie Caine of Los Angeles-based Empty Nest Support Services, which offers private phone sessions and seminars that rely on art therapy and journaling. "This is a grieving process for some parents," says Caine, who in October will counsel empty nesters at a spa retreat in California. "They can't just 'get over it.' " (One of her suggestions for moms in mourning: throw a party and ask the guests to bring a card on which they've written what their empty-nester pal would be "fabulous at giving the world now.")

Interestingly, parents who feel good about the way their kids have turned out tend to cope better, while those who aren't as confident have a harder time, says Norval Glenn, a sociology professor at the University of Texas at Austin who specializes in marriage.

Either way, parents shouldn't get too used to the echoing hallways, since the recession often means an empty nest won't stay empty for long. And when adult children come home to roost, says Cheryl Pickford, 54, who recently completed an empty-nest workshop in Adrian, Mich., "it's a totally different ball game." Boundaries rule. "If you're not good at saying no," says Caine, "gear up."

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