





Family ties: the sequel

Trying to maintain connections with adult children after they leave home can be a challenge, for even the closest relationships. We've pulled together tips on how you can get the balance right.

Words **SUE WILLIAMS**

WHEN ADULT CHILDREN leave home, it can be a tough time for everyone. Parents may miss the constant companionship of their kids, while those young people often take some time to adapt to not having Mum and Dad around, ready to drop everything for their convenience.

It's a whole new phase in life, and difficult to navigate if you're not prepared – for both sides. “Parents, on the one hand, may feel like celebrating their new freedom as they see their children heading out the door into a brave new world,” says Relationships Australia NSW CEO Elisabeth Shaw. “That’s what they’ve always prepared them for.

“But at the same time, they’re anxious, knowing they’ll miss the attachment and calling out after them, ‘Don’t forget us!’ Parents can experience this as rejection or being taken for granted, especially when they haven’t established how they’re going to have a relationship into the future.”

The Australian government’s annual Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Report reveals that the nation’s children are

living longer with their parents than they ever have before, so when that separation finally comes, it can be even more painful than it might have been in the past. In fact, the HILDA report published in 2024 finds that just over half of young men (54%) and 47% of young women aged 18 to 29 years old are still living under the same roof as their parents. That’s mostly a factor of a rising cost of living, falling incomes and higher property prices preventing that first home buy.

But Elisabeth says it’s good for parents to anticipate what it’s going to be like when their young eventually fly the nest, make sure their own relationship with their partner is strong so they can withstand the change and support each other, and not expect too much of their departing brood.

CHANGING OLD HABITS

It’s important to understand boundaries while at the same time working out the best ways to stay in touch. “That might mean inviting the children back regularly to enjoy a family dinner or you might establish new traditions, like all meeting in a different restaurant once a month,” she says. “So you’re meeting on neutral >

territory and making sure you're working out different frames of references for moving forward.

"Some kids may love coming back home for dinner, and find it very grounding and reassuring, but others might see it as a bit suffocating or like a straitjacket. It's also vital to understand that no-one owes anyone anything. Parents sometimes feel their children should feel a sense of obligation and they deserve a visit and want their children to be dutiful and feel guilty. But it's much better to set up a healthy relationship where both sides want to see each other."

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Relationships Australia NSW

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Psychologist Amanda Gordon of Armchair Psychology agrees, saying it's a tribute to good parenting when children leave home to embark on their own lives. Preparing them for that, after all, is the principal job of parents.

"We know it's important that children leave home but we're older and have wisdom to offer them and it can feel like they're abandoning us and sometimes

choosing to live their lives in ways we didn't expect," Amanda says. "That's one of the real challenges of parenthood.

"I was talking to a mother last night who says she misses her 19-year-old son who's just left and wants to be his mum. I told her she's still his mum, but he has different needs now. You have to work out those new boundaries. And it can be difficult in so many ways. They might struggle and ask for financial help and loans, and the parent wasn't expecting that, either," she adds.

It can always be a tricky balance. Young people want their independence but it's good if parents can gently remind them that they're always there for them, without being too demanding of regular phone calls and catch-ups.

Yet if parents feel they're losing touch with their kids, it's helpful to give gentle reminders. These may be phrases like, 'I miss seeing you' or, 'It would be lovely to catch up', rather than making them feel bad for not phoning or visiting, Elisabeth suggests. "Children are very alert to parents putting the guilt trip on them," she says.

"And it's good for parents to ask themselves if they have a real reason to worry when their children aren't in touch as much as they like. They can often feel rejection when it's simply that their child is too busy at work, or has a trip planned, or is trying to find their way. That's natural." ●

I wish my preoccupied 23-year-old son Tally goodnight. He's in the bunk above me as the Indian Pacific train trundles across Australia between Sydney and Perth. We had dinner together and a nightcap drink in the lounge carriage. We'd hugged before he swung his wiry, tall frame onto the bunk.

But his heart and head are now 2,400km away, back with his beautiful new bride in the Blue Mountains, NSW. At this moment, in the middle of the Nullarbor Plain, it feels like the Never Never is a manifestation of our relationship. But it's good painful. It's right. Normal.

This 4,352km three-night/four-day transcontinental train journey is the longest time we've been constantly in each other's presence in three years. The last time was when he lived at home and we both had COVID, dozing and snuffling together on the lounge and watching stupid TV.

Since then, his life – and mine – has changed. He seemed a bit shocked at the speed in which we turned his bedroom into an office (by nightfall the day he moved out). He makes his own decisions now; another woman holds his heart and I'm not privy

BY THE NUMBERS: REACTIONS TO AN EMPTY NEST

THE AUSTRALIAN SENIORS SERIES:
EMPTY NESTERS REPORT 2024 FINDS...

44%

of over 50s feel pride when their children move out

36%

experience sadness

29%

are worried

29%

feel happiness



To read the full results of **The Australian Seniors Series: Empty Nesters Report 2024**, go to seniors.com.au and search 'Empty Nesters'.



Ellen Hill with her adult son Tally during their recent transcontinental trip on board the Indian Pacific.

"We're still close, but..."

Writer Ellen Hill, 52, recently travelled across Australia with her adult son, resetting their familial ties.

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to where he is and what he does.

We're still close, but his occasional side-eye glances are a reminder that I must learn it's no longer my right to interrogate him about his day, direct him on how he

spends his money or his time, how to text his boss, or rouse on him for not eating healthily. How much sleep he gets, video games he plays or which internet provider he chooses is none of my business.

We will part ways in

Fremantle as adult equals; he to a new career, family responsibilities of his own and a wife to love. Me? I'll spend four days roaming the city at will, eating too much sugar, leaving the TV on all night and my clothes all over the floor.

When I return home, my husband and I will drink midweek wine, eat dinner at lunchtime, play old rock music loudly, dance to modern tech vibes and slope down to the shops in pyjamas with free abandon.