Transitions: The Family Life Cycle and the Empty Nest

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Faculty of the Adler Graduate School

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for

the Degree of Master of Arts in

Adlerian Counseling and Psychotherapy

By:

Kimberly Putz

October 2012
Abstract

The focus of this paper will be on the transition to empty nest for the marital couple and leaving the home for the emerging adults. This paper explores family life cycles, provides an overview of Adler’s view of marriage, and discusses the roles family members hold and the impact on family life cycle transitions. This paper also examines the combined stress of approaching mid-life while also experiencing the empty nest. The view of the child emerging from childhood to adulthood is examined and the potential impact of parenting style on the preparedness of the emerging adult. The impact of the return of adult children on the marriage is analyzed and the paper provides information on research about this important family life cycle as well as assessments and treatment techniques for therapists who work with clients struggling with this life stage transition. The focus of this paper is on families who follow a traditional path where they grow up, marry or partner, have children and approach the end of life.
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Transitions: The Family Life Cycle and the Empty Nest

Families experience many transitions, from early marriage, to the addition of children, parenting teens, moving to empty nest, retirement, and senior years. The family life cycles bring joy and trials and each cycle can bring emotional challenges. Framo (1994) states, “Each developmental stage of the family life cycle is a shock to the system because roles have to be reassigned, values reoriented, status positions shifted, loss and mourning dealt with, and needs met through new channels” (p. 90). The family life cycle is defined as the period beginning with the formation of the emerging adult to joining of families through marriage, the addition of children, families with adolescents, launching children and families in later life (Carter & McGoldrick, 1980). Many things have changed since the concept of the empty-nest syndrome was first conceptualized. Many mothers now work outside the home thus giving them a role beyond parent. Methods of staying connected are more readily available with email, text, Skype and more. Clay (2003), states, “…most parents enjoy greater freedom, a reconnection with their spouses and more time to pursue their own goals and interests once their children leave the home” (p. 40). The concept of empty nest is evolving for many; however, family roles, economics, and age at this transitional time play a factor in marital satisfaction. Much research has been done about the transition into parenting and the impact to the couple and individuals, though less research has been done to understand the transition out of active parenting.

Family Life Cycles

As we examine the specific cycle of the empty nest, it is important to provide context on all stages of the family life cycle. Gerson (1995) defines the cycles as starting as an unattached young adult, moving to coupling, then to expansion with the addition of children, and then to contraction where the children leave the home and begin their own family life cycle.
Unattached Young Adult

The unattached young adult is one who is establishing financial independence from their parents. A person in this stage may still have some dependencies on their parents or may have discovered autonomy and be living an independent life. Gerson (1995) describes this stage as having the challenge of developing a strong sense of self (p.96). For many this stage begins as the unattached young adult enters college, or begins their first experience away from home. It is important to be able to be emotionally resourceful in this stage to understand their place in society. As young adults interact with friends and form relationships it is important that they can have a balance of belonging with their unique individuality.

Coupling

Coupling is when the two people come together and make a commitment. This is the merging of two people with unique families of origin to create the new family lifestyle. Gerson (1995) makes an important point in that “…marriage is more than just the union of two people who love each other. It is the merger of two family branches to create a new family unit that will perpetuate many of the antecedent patterns and traditions” (p.93). While the couple likely is experiencing the joy of being together, knowingly or not, they are creating a new system that will transcend generations. Hiedemann, Suhomlinova, and Rand (1998) state, “…marital satisfaction is highest at the time of marriage, steadily declines over the childbearing and childrearing periods” (p. 221). The individuals in the new couple carry their families of origin into their new family system. Gerson (1995) points out that there is a challenge in creating an identity as a couple while also continuing to hold ties to their families of origin (p. 94). Balancing the backgrounds to create new shared meaning becomes both a challenge or struggle and a way to continually get to know and understand each other.
Expansion

Expansion is the addition of children. This stage brings joy but also added stress. Framo (1994) states, “Since parenthood is romanticized in our culture, like marriage, the couple is often shocked by the reality of taking care of a baby, by the loss of freedom, and by the way their marriage is affected” (p. 99). The focus abruptly moves from a couple centered to baby or child centered. An important challenge for new parents is to keep a sense of them as a couple as they meet the demands of caring for children. Once that stage is accepted and transitioned, early in expansion the family unit is relatively controlled with parents setting the boundaries of the children’s interactions to the outside world. As children grow, they expand their social world to school and friends. Framo (1988) adds that this is the time when “family rituals, those satisfying, repetitive events in which the whole family participates, provide the family adhesives which are remembered when the family gets together in later years and reminisces” (p. 103). A challenge for parents is to gradually expand the boundaries to help children develop autonomy in a secure way. As children grow into adolescence, the family cycle begins to move toward and prepares for contraction. Aquilino (1997) states, “The movement toward mutuality in relations with parents during adolescence sets the stage for the development of children’s psychosocial competence” (p. 673). As with couples moving through the cycles, the relationship between the parents and the child are continually being renegotiated and transforming.

Contraction

Contraction begins as children enter adolescence and prepare to leave the family. Parents help the children with support so the children are confident in their newly expanded outside world while at the same time prepare themselves for their contracted new world. As couples move from the distractions of daily parenting to the cycle when they have the time to focus on
each other, several outcomes could be expected. They may realize they have forgotten how to be a couple, they may mourn the absence of their child(ren), they may find themselves in a honeymoon like state. There are no defined right or wrong ways to transition to empty nest. As couples renegotiate their marital system they examine their commitment to the relationship and what is core to their values as a couple. In a study done by Gorchoff, John, & Helson (2008), they predicted three attributes to that contribute to perceived happiness in empty nest: an increase in the quantity of time and energy invested in the marriage, an increase in the quality of time spent with their partner, and with perceptions of their children’s success. However, after completing their research, they found that, “of the three potential explanations for the link between the empty nest and marital satisfaction, only increasing enjoyment of time with the partner was supported” (p.1198). It is how couples enjoy their time that positively increases satisfaction in marriage. Newman (2008) states, “parents who have given their offspring independence early on feel a sense of pride and joy when their children begin the campus or any away from home young adult experience.” The more prepared children are for this stage, the more likely the couple is prepared as well. Gerson (1995) adds “…parents must prepare for the contraction in their relational world and often must attend to both their individual needs and the needs as a couple for the first time in many years” (p. 94). How the marital partners return to the state of couple during the contraction stage sets the tone for the remaining years of their marriage as to if it will be felt as a depressing sense of loss or a euphoric feeling of a return to the honeymoon era.

Primacy in the marital relationship is important at all family life states. Gerson (1995) states, “The couple who does not have a stable mutually satisfying relationship will have difficulties parenting together and adjusting to the children leaving home and old age” (p. 100).
Where trust and flexibility are lacking, the stress of moving through the family life cycles can create a break in the marriage and developmental deficits for the children. Gerson (1995) reports a study that found that parents who are willing to accept and promote autonomy in their children will be less likely to experience their own mid-life crisis (p. 105). It is also important to realize that families do not experience each phase completely before the next. Family life cycles can overlap, particularly in those stages of expansion and contraction. In expansion, more children can be added to the family and the family continues to expand. In contraction children to not leave all at once and many times return to the home for some time.

**Adlerian Views of Marriage**

It is important to consider an Adlerian point of view in looking at family life cycles and the impact to the marital relationship. White Blanton (2000) writes of Adler’s views on marriages and states, “Adler pointed out; too often marriage is portrayed as an end or final goal. Instead, marriage is a continuing opportunity to face the tasks of life and to contribute to the well-being of family and society” (p. 416). In many ways that statement points to the very need for couples to continually adapt and transform through the family life cycles. The Adlerian view of marriage has an emphasis on balance of roles and willingness to adapt throughout the life of the marriage. White Blanton (2000) refers to characteristics in marriage in three areas of contrast: marriage equality versus hierarchy, cooperation versus competition, and commitment versus evasion and states, “These dimensions are not mutually exclusive in marriage, but the nature of a marital relationship can be understood to some extent by ascertaining the relative degree of emphasis the partners place on these processes as they relate to one another” (p. 412). In terms of marital equality versus hierarchy, White Blanton states,
As an Adlerian view of marriage indicates, there is no hierarchy in a marriage between equals. Either spouse is capable of providing leadership as needed or wanted and is comfortable with his or her spouse’s doing the same. With their hierarchical views of marriage, social scientists have become too focused on who does what or who decides what. Perhaps couples themselves have a clearer sense of what true equality entails. (p. 414)

The concept that marital equality is left for the couple to define can be a freeing idea for many couples. Realizing that either can provide leadership or be led and knowing that the roles can and should adapt as needed is important as couples grow together.

When thinking of cooperation versus competition in marriage White Blanton (2000) states,

Adler believed that the difficulties and challenges of marriage should be approached with the understanding that the welfare of others, not just the self, was involved. Such a perspective entails a focus on improvement and a willingness to make the contributions that would result in improvement without being overly focused on “What is in it for me? (p. 415).

Adler approaches marriage much like his approach to life, in that lens of social interest that allows us to realize and serve the larger community. In holding an empathetic stance in marriage, each couple is better able to serve not only their marriage, but largely be a healthier individual as well.

When looking at the third contrasting characteristic in marriage, commitment versus evasion, White Blanton (2000) states, “… essential to Adler’s description of marriage is the concept of comradeship, which describes the social and emotional union of two individuals in
marriage” (p. 412). Friendship and enjoying time together is at the core of marriage. As couples go through life cycles and transitions, the time spent together is essential in identifying their marital strengths and purpose. Focusing on the goals as a couple but also toward the greater society provides an outline for positive marital satisfaction.

**Economic Factors in Couple’s Transition to Empty Nest**

Economics also play an important role in satisfaction at this stage of marriage. Many times, couples entering the empty nest are at a point where they are earning more than when their children were younger. Dual income family structure also impacts marital satisfaction following empty nest. In a study done by Hiedemann et al. (1998), it was found that college education on the part of the parents positively impacts the marriage and couples are less likely to divorce during the first decade of marriage. Given the positive impact of dual incomes, Hiedemann et al. (1998) also found that, “longer marriages are expected to be reservoirs of jointly held economic and emotional capital based on long-term investments not easily abandoned” (p. 221). There are implications that women who have financial independence are more capable of being financially independent, thus may opt for divorce once the children leave the home; however, it seems the education level of the working woman is more of a factor. College educated women have a significant reduction in marital disruption (Hiedemann et al. 1998, p. 228). The study conducted by Hiedemann et al. (1998) concludes that college educated spouses who have been married two decades or longer view their marriage as an investment that provides resilience for the relationship to remain.

Conversely, where there is already financial strain in a marriage the impact of children leaving the home can lead to dissolution of marriage. Freeman, Carlson, & Sperry (1993) found that “Financial stress adds to other problems within the marriage. This can lead to a “pile-up” of
family stressors” (p. 331). The added stress of the family structure changing may add to the “pile” of stress already felt due to financial difficulties. Financial difficulties also impact when and how the emerging adult leaves the home. White (1994) states, “…most students felt 18 and 21 were appropriate ages to leave home and that financial difficulties were the chief legitimating factor for staying longer than this” (p. 84). In a family with financial stress, the added weight of potentially not being able to support a child’s college tuition or the potential loss of that child’s economic contributions can also add to the pile up of stress. The marital couple and the transitioning adult can work together to reach an agreed way to approach this transition when economic stress plays an important factor.

**Family Member Roles**

The role a family has defined also contributes to marital satisfaction upon entering into the empty nest phase. Bates Harkins (1978) states, “those with more traditional attitudes toward women’s roles might perceive the loss of the more active components of the mother role as a major role loss” (p.550). Being that her article was written in 1978, the attitudes towards role of mother and expectations of that role have evolved, however, for many people the perceived loss of the role of mother can be significant. As fathers are more involved in children’s daily activities, the loss of the role of father is becoming more significant. Also to consider are what alternate roles are available when the role of mother has been the primary role for many years. Where fathers have had more traditional roles of working and less time spent raising the children, they may experience a loss and wish they had been more involved with their children. The roles of mother and father factor in determining marital satisfaction in empty nest stage will vary depending on each family. In a study conducted by Devries, Kerrick & Oetinger (2008) found differences in how mothers and fathers appraised their level of satisfaction during the
transition to empty nest. Devries, et al. (2008) found that for mothers, “the awareness of the limited “time left” for them with their child-rearing role seems to have triggered a desire to pursue emotionally meaningful goals for themselves” (p. 14). While mothers reported a tendency to prepare for the empty nest, Devries et al. (2008) found that fathers, “seem to be doing very little to anticipate or prepare for its impact” (p. 14). The results from this study show a trend where mothers prepare emotionally for the change in role helps them transition long term. Fathers may not feel an immediate impact of children leaving the home and may have a delayed negative response to the change in the family. It is important for families to consider how to intentionally plan for the change and prepare for the feelings with actionable activities to help with the transition.

As couples move into this next phase of the family life cycle they experience an opportunity to create shared goals and experiences. Gorchoff et al. (2008) speak to the positive aspect of role changes,

Increased marital satisfaction after children have left home may be related to lessened role strain; that is, partners who no longer have children at home may engage in fewer roles and engage in those less intensely, freeing up time and energy that can be invested in the marriage. p. 1195

Couples who realize that the empty nest stage provides an opportunity to focus on the marriage are better positioned to positively transition with shared goals and a common meaning. Stone, (1993) states, “Each partner brings to marriage individual goals, aspirations, dreams and wishes. Each one also brings specific goals, aspirations, dreams and wishes for the marriage itself” (p. 395). As a couple, it is important to revisit the individual goals and to communicate with each other to build shared goals. Bitter (1993) states, “Within families people come to know
themsevles, gain a sense of worth, and discover the possibilities in their lives” (p. 330). As children grow and leave the family, they also have the opportunity to create their independent goals as they continue in their life cycle.

Parents’ roles in their children’s lives change as the emerging adult moves out of the home. In considering transitions to college, Gavazzi (2012) states, “…well-functioning families throughout the high school years must balance the need for members to remain connected with the need for members to experience a sense of independence.” The role of parent and family provides a necessary backdrop for the emerging adult preparing to leave the nest and create independence. Waldo, Horne, & Kenny (2009) state,

Families vary greatly in size, structure, composition, race, culture, religion, and access to societal power and economic resources, but all play critical roles in providing support and nurturance for family members and preparing them for engagement in the world beyond the family. (p. 208)

Parents are in a position to enable their children to make choices in their newly independent lives. Gavazzi (2012) states, “…the successful transition to college requires mothers and fathers to reshape their efforts into a role more akin to “coach,” in large part because university life comes with the expectation that students are responsible for themselves.” One may consider a university to be the liaison between the parent the emerging adult. Implications of a positive transition are seen beyond individual. Waldo et al. (2009), states, “Stronger families not only generate stronger individuals but also contribute to stronger schools and communities” (p. 208). The preparedness of families for each transition may positively or negatively impact not only those individuals, their future generations and also the greater communities around them. The
positive or negative completion of the developmental tasks of moving into each family life cycle impact the larger community beyond the family and can impact future generations.

**Impact of Middle Age on Transition to Empty Nest**

Most couples approach the empty nest phase at a time when they are also hitting middle age. Factors that affect individuals in midlife can complicate the added change of the children leaving the home. Devries et al., (2008) propose that middle age has historically been defined as between the ages of thirty-five and sixty-five, though argue that the definition may not be noted by chronological age (p. 7). Life events may better define what is midlife for a traditional family whether it is the children graduating from high school or college or the addition of grandchildren. As people live longer, the ideals of midlife are changing. Having children is no longer for those just in their twenties and thirties. This extension is leading to the positive change of how midlife is viewed. Often middle age is thought of as a mode of crisis; however Devries et al. (2008) suggest middle age is “a more mixed picture of both gains and losses for parents as they move through the midlife transition” (p.6). It is a time where many take appraisal of their life’s accomplishments to this point and begin planning and perhaps rethinking what the future holds both individually and as a couple. There is a common expectation that midlife is unpleasant and unwelcome. Wethington (2000) shares the following observation,

A characteristic the differing midlife crises perspectives share is that they assume the passage through midlife is apt to be both eventful and stressful. Another shared characteristic is that they seek to define the predictable crisis or expected stress that midlife poses to an average person in contrast to other periods of life. Another assumption is that aging itself is apt to be perceived as stressful, for existential reasons. Midlife symbolizes a more drastic decline to come. (p. 87)
More than any other family cycle the contraction phase has been viewed as a crisis. For some, the expectation of a crisis may provide a source of comfort (Wethington, 2000 p. 101). If they do not experience crisis, they are pleasantly surprised and if they do, it was expected and getting through the crisis is the positive marker. Expectations of a negative experience in midlife may factor how individuals and couples make choices on how they live their lives.

Lachman (2004) states,

In midlife, as in other life periods, one must make choices, and select what to do, how to invest time and resources, and what areas to change. To the extent that one has some control over outcomes, one also may take responsibility or blame when things do not go well. (p. 310)

Midlife can include multiple factors of children leaving the home, caring for aging parents but also a maturity to make decisions and choices with conviction and responsibility. The time of midlife can be a crisis for some and a time of tranquility for others. For some, health concerns become a problem and for others it is a time of financial security and wellbeing (Lachman 2004, p. 314). The multiple changes in relationships during middle age are both complex and engaging. Lachman (2004) states,

The middle-aged are involved with the lives of the young and the old. They may be launching children and experiencing the empty nest, to having grown children return home (boomerang kids), becoming grandparents, giving or receiving financial assistance, taking care of a widowed or sick parent, or getting used to being the oldest generation in the extended family after both parents have passed away. (p. 322-323)

This time in life is perhaps the most varied among peers depending largely on current familiar roles. There are also indications that in this time of life, people have built relationships so that
middle age is a time where people have the most social support. Story et al. (2007) state, “Older adults describe their relationships as having less conflict and higher levels of pleasure and report greater positive affect in marital interaction than do younger adults” (p. 719). They further explain that there is a greater emphasis on the positive aspects of close relationships in increased age as there is an awareness of limits of time left to spend together. In a study done by Story et al. (2007), they found that, “as the demands of family and career wane and relationship-enhancing activities increase, marital satisfaction is more likely to resemble earlier newlywed levels” (p. 725). The removal of the active parenting role provides the opportunity for the marital couple to become more active in their role of spouse. Devries et al. (2008) also state that “there is a significant relationship between parents’ appraisals of how their children have turned out and their own sense of well being” (p. 8). Many parents use their child’s perceived success or lack of success as a measure of successful they are as parents and as individuals. How they view their grown children impacts how they view themselves.

**The Emerging Adult**

The important developmental task of leaving the home and becoming independent is essential to the future family cycles. Whiteman, McHale, and Crouter (2010) recognize the significance of the first child leaving the home and state, “In many cases, leaving home may represent the first marker in the developmental process of moving from adolescence to adulthood” (p. 461). The impact of leaving the home is an important step in developing independence and autonomy. Kins, Beyers, Soenens, and Vansteenkiste (2009) name this developmental stage as emerging adulthood and define it as,

*...emerging adulthood* as a new concept to denote the developmental period between adolescence and adulthood, during which young people feel neither an adolescent nor yet
an adult. This period of feeling “in between”, which typically spans the ages from 18 to 25 years, is characterized by frequent change and exploration of different life directions without commitments to adult roles. (p. 1416)

As children emerge into adulthood the parental relationship plays an important role in this developmental stage. Parent’s use of control versus the use encouraging the development of autonomy in the emerging adult are researched.

**Parental Control**

The influence of parents on the social development of children is widely researched and the studies outcomes and interpretations are greatly varied. How children are raised and the model presented to them for life is a large factor in the development of their self esteem. As adults, we can change our point of view on how we were raised; however, it is likely the impact to the self esteem is deeper and more difficult to change. Adler recognized the relation of parenting styles to children’s development and developed educational child guidance clinics. Mosak and Maniacci (1999) describe the goals of the clinics as having “three major components in Alder’s childrearing methods were encouragement, the understanding of the four goals of children’s misbehavior, and the use of natural and logical consequences” (p.148.). The clinics were also essential in the promotion of social interest; they created a sense of belonging for the children and parents, as well as to build the childrearing skills of parents. During family and parent education clinics, families learned how to work with their current situations but also from the counseling of the other families in the clinic. This practice both multiplied the learning across families and also reinforced positive family development and promoted encouragement.

Many studies discuss implications of parenting style and the relation to the locus of control. Bruner (1984) defines locus of control as,
Locus of control can be defined as the disposition to perceive one’s reinforcements as consequences of one’s own behavior or as due to extrinsic factors. Those who believe they exercise some control over their destinies are considered to be internally controlled. Externals believe their reinforcements are controlled by luck, chance, fate or powerful others (p. 229).

For Adlerians, it is essential to be able to control how we react to the realities in our worlds. We understand that how we interpret our experiences helps define future decisions.

The correlation of locus of control and parenting is important to the self esteem of children. McClun and Merrell (1998) state,

Specific parenting behaviors found to correlate with locus of control in adolescents have included: consistency in discipline, protectiveness, nurturance, approval, attentiveness, allowance of autonomy, degree of control, reinforcement of positive behaviors, and physical punishment…internal locus of control was more significantly correlated with consistency of discipline, balanced autonomy and reinforcement of positive behaviors (p. 382).

Learning to process thoughts on our own without the input of others is essential to the emotional development of children. Without being able to focus internally, we are constantly looking to others as to how to define our own reactions and actions.

Internal locus of control is found to be more as a result of an authoritative parenting style. Spokas and Heimberg (2009) state, “…several studies have illustrated that parents of children with internal locus of control are more likely to reward and encourage autonomy and independence” (p.544). A child who has an internal locus of control is more aware of the personal choices available and is aware of their place in society. They are less likely to depend
on how others perceive them than those who look external from themselves; those with an external locus of control.

External locus of control is more typically developed when the parents use an authoritarian style. Spokas and Heimberg (2009) state,

Overprotective parenting contributes to the development of a cognitive style in which an individual believes that outcomes are largely determined by external factors. This cognitive style may develop as a result of the control exerted over the child by the parent or because overprotection may interfere with the child’s acquisition of necessary social skills, leaving the child feeling out of control when presented with social demands. It is the expectation that one’s behavior is controlled by external forces that then serves to increase social anxiety (p. 548).

Parents who are authoritarian in many ways are overprotecting their children. They determine for the child how their day is structured, the make decisions for the child as well as allowing for no input from the child. Children of authoritarian parents are left without the capability to make decisions on their own. Spokas and Heimberg (2009) explain how this become cyclical,

As the child’s external locus of control increases, his/her reliance on parents may increase, which could contribute to parents increasing their control and protection.

Reinforcing such beliefs through overprotection may serve to increase the child’s social anxiety and may also increase the child’s avoidance (p.549).

At some point, children with external locus of control are likely to either lose interest in the world outside of their family or to rebel in search of their voice, however, will be ill prepared to face society without the direction of their parents.
Locus of control is often correlated with the academic success in research results. Studies find that most often students with an internal locus of control are more academically successful than those with an external locus of control. This is an indicator of future success as adults, both socially and in their vocation.

Parents continue to play an important role in the lives of their emerging adult. Kins, Beyers, and Soenens (2011) state, “Separation-individuation not only refers to a redefinition of the self but also to a redefinition of the relationship with caregivers” (p. 647). Kins et al. recognize the importance of the relationship to be redefined as the child moves to adulthood.

Kins et al. found,

Psychological control is a form of intrusive parenting behavior, characteristic of parents who pressure their children through manipulative strategies such as guilt-induction, love withdrawal, and conditional approval. Because psychologically controlling parents fail to take an empathic stance toward their children and pressure them to meet the parents’ standards, their behavior interferes with the child’s need for autonomy. Research has consistently shown that psychological control is predictive of poor adjustment and of internalizing problems in particular. (p. 649)

The use of parental control as children emerge into adults is unhealthy and confusing to all parties. Kins et al. state,

Dependency-oriented psychological control is defined as a specific form of psychological control driven by parental concerns about interpersonal closeness and relatedness. These parents use pressuring and intrusive parenting strategies in order to keep the child emotionally and physically in close proximity. (p. 650)
Parents who use psychological control are likely not trying to harm their children’s development but are unnecessarily trying to control the relationship and maintain the previous stage of their relationship. It is in an attempt to remain close that parents may disrupt the development of the emerging adult. Kins et al. (2011) further state, “Parents who are highly anxious about their adolescent’s distancing deny their child’s increasing striving for independence and demonstrate age-inappropriate behavior toward their child” (p. 649). Parental use of control during this stage is a preservation technique to keep them in their familiar role of parent and to cling to their relationship with their child. Soenens and Vansteenkiste (2005) found, “Psychological control has been defined as characteristic of parents who are overly concerned about their personal position in the parent–child relationship and who make use of intrusive parenting techniques to demand compliance from their children” (p. 591). Parents can come to understand that the best use of their parenting skills can be in releasing control and witnessing their child emerge into a happy adult.

**Development of Autonomy**

Kins et al. (2009) speak to the significance of the development of autonomy before and during this stage, “Growing up is inextricably intertwined with the development of autonomous functioning. Particularly during adolescence and emerging adulthood, the development of autonomy is considered a central developmental task” (p. 1426). The capability to define personal goals and aspirations to enable independent decision making is a crucial task during this stage. Waldo, Horne, and Kenny (2009) state,

Emotional systems in families that are entangled and fused prevent their members from achieving differentiation, resulting in vulnerability to volatile emotions and dependency in relationships. Undifferentiated individuals tend to seek romantic partners who are
similarly dependent, in an effort to fulfill their dependency needs. But two
undifferentiated partners are rarely able to consistently satisfy each others' needs. (p. 210).

Without the development of autonomy, future relationships may be built not out of partnership but out of a need for dependence rather than independence. Kins et al. (2009) state, “Highly autonomous individuals endorse actions that fully embody their personal goals and values” (p. 1426). Achieving autonomy provides the ability to actively engage in an independent lifestyle. Soenens and Vansteenkiste (2005) state, “…autonomy and dependence on others are not opposites. A parent can support autonomy while still caring for his child, or an adolescent can develop a secure relationship with his parents without feeling controlled in one’s actions” (p. 590). Parents cultivate and nurture autonomy by showing interest and caring about the independent decisions and actions their child makes. Actively asking and providing encouragement positively reinforces the development of the emerging adult. Seiffge-Krenke (2006) states, “Overall, it was shown that adolescents benefited from having parents who supported their child’s autonomy while maintaining a medium level of control” (p. 874). The significance in developing autonomy for the emerging adult is further demonstrated in the further adjustment of family roles and expectations. Whiteman, McHale, and Crouter (2010) state, “…the transition out of the home may provide a chance for relationship transformations, and as such, represents an important time to examine families” (p. 462). As the child emerges to adult the relationship with the parents is redefined to that of coach, mentor and friend. Clay (2003) states, “Parents report that seeing a child start down the path toward successful adulthood gives them a feeling of joy and pride. Most importantly, the parent/child relationship actually improves for many of them when children leave home” (p. 40). Parents, who raise their children
to make decisions on their own, learn from their mistakes and grow as independent individual find feelings of pride and accomplishment that their parental job was one done well.

**Impact on Family when Young Adults Return Home**

Many young adults are finding themselves returning to live with their parents. They may be experiencing a new transition whether it is graduating from college, a job transition, saving for a home or others. The current economic times cause many young adults to take lower paying jobs, and many struggle with debt from college loans. Clay (2003) states, “According to the 2000 census, almost four million young adults between 25 and 34 years old now live with their parents – possibly the result of a tough job market, delayed marriage, high housing costs and other factors” (p. 41). While this trend is becoming more common, the impact on the family and on the marital couple’s relationship is important to consider. Mitchell (2006) adds that this trend has been going on for at least thirty years and states, “…during the economic recessions of the late 1980s and 1990s, rates of intergenerational coresidence began to increase, and again in the 2000s” (p. 328). This prolonged cultural shift may continue as the emerging adult phase tends to become an accepted extension of coming of age. Mitchell (2006) states,

…high rates of returning home in the United States appear to be partly related to unique economic and educational factors, such as the need to attend college, and then return for a transitionary period. There is also a cultural tolerance of union dissolution which necessitate returning to the “comforts of home” after a failed relationship. (p. 334)

The largest contributing factor to positive or negative marital satisfaction after adult children return home is the expectations parents have of their children and during this stage of empty nest. In a study conducted by Mitchell and Gee (1996), they found, “…parental expectations about their children’s timing and sequence of living arrangement transitions during early adulthood
play a significant role in their marital satisfaction” (pp. 446-447). They also found that children who return home multiple times are more likely to negatively impact the marital satisfaction of their parents (p. 447). Culturally, a shift has been made where most parents may expect children to return for a limited time, however, extended lengths of time and multiple returns home are more likely to negatively impact both the marital relationship and that of the parent-child relationship.

**Impact on Parental Involvement**

When adult children return home, it has been culturally thought of as negative, even as a step back. Mitchell and Gee (1996) state, “…the idea that coresident children have a negative impact on family well-being as a whole is becoming accepted as social fact by the media, general public and some scientists” (p. 842). If expectations are negatively set that when an adult child returns home, the family and particularly the marital couple are negatively impacted sets the situation up for an uncomfortable experience. Aquilino and Supple (1991) state,

Parents complained that adult children did not pay room or board, did not help much with housework, and had lifestyles that clashed with their own. The older the child, the more unhappy the parent. However, the situation may be different for older parents with coresident adult children. (p. 15)

Aquilino and Supple (1991) point out what may be assumed social expectations; that if adult children return home, there should be an expectation of financial or household contribution. They also find that if the parents are older, the adult child returning home may be viewed more positively as a companion and comrade. In a study done by Mitchell (2006) he states,

The trend toward delayed transitions implies that family socialization and parental roles and responsibilities over the life course are restructuring. Beginning with the tendency
toward delayed home leaving, many mid-life and aging parents must modify their prior expectations and resume their day to day “in house” parental roles to accommodate their children’s transition to adulthood. (p. 336)

Mitchell (2006) states that parents must adjust their experiences and expectations in mid-life and in the empty nest cycle to meet the needs of their children. Mitchell and Gee (1996) state, “The return of adult children is assumed to prolong dependence on parents, which may place stress on their marriages” (p. 843). This view points to the expectations historically set where the return of children to the home was viewed as negative and as a burden to the marital couple. A cultural shift is happening and is making this delayed or prolonged transition reflect more positively on the couple and the family.

A Shift in Cultural Expectations

As more and more young adults are marrying later, extending time in college and overall delaying the transition into full adulthood there is a cultural shift happening in expectations for family cycles and transitions. In the study conducted by Aquilino and Supple (1991), they found that,

Parental satisfaction with coresidence appears to be the highest when parents are involved with adult children in pleasurable activities and when adult children are more self-sufficient in the relationship. This suggests that the period of coresidence in early adulthood has the potential to enhance intergenerational solidarity and to set the stage for closer parent-child relations after children become fully independent of parents. (p.25)

Aquilino and Supple (1991) point to the positive impact coresidence can bring not only to the immediate short term, but also imply longer term positive generational relationships. This concept is also found in a study conducted by Mitchell and Gee (1996) who state,
The fact that our data suggests that families (and marriages in particular) cope well with the change in family life course towards increasing co-residence in the empty nest stage points to the adaptability of families in light of wider economic and societal pressures. In fact, this notion can be extended to include positive effects of co-residence in marriage. (p. 447)

Being able to work together as a marital couple to make changes and adapt during any life cycle positively impacts the marriage. Where couples continue to adapt as they grow older, the return of the adult children is viewed as positive.

Where the cultural norm continues to shift and allow and even expect adult children to return home, impacts spread beyond the immediate couple and family of origin. Mitchell (2006) states, “Overall, a delay in family-related transitions to adulthood has significant implications for mid-life and aging families, particularly with respect to intergenerational relations. Coupled with rapid generation aging, this can create new opportunities and challenges for young people and their families” (p. 336). The impact to the relationships between parents and young adults is important to consider. Aquilino and Supple (1991) found,

Parents’ experience of adult children’s home-leaving is not merely a function of children’s presence or absence in the home. The key factor is understanding parents’ experience is the transformation in family relationships generated by adult children’s departures from and returns to the parental home. Parents’ development in mid-life, including changes in well-being, self-development, and the life satisfaction, must be evaluated in light of the changing structure and content of family relationships. (pp 25-26).
There is an implied impact to the family structure that spreads to future generations. Mitchell (2006) states, “Unique processes of reciprocal socialization and exchange of support may also occur as parents and children may develop more peer–like orientations toward each other” (p. 336). The idea that the parent-child relationship becomes a mutually supportive bond not only enhances the marital couple, the parent child bond but also extends to the support parents may need as they age. Aquilino and Supple (1991) speak to the evolution of the return of adult children to the home, “…individuals are changed by changing families, and families are changed by the behavior and developmental courses of individual members” (p. 14). As the economy and cultural expectations continue to evolve, families will also evolve and norms and cycles will continue to shift. Couples who work together and share their expectations and set family relationship goals will continue to thrive in this period of change.

**Implications for Therapy**

Challenges faced during transitions of family life cycles can result in family members seeking therapy. When considering this stage, of empty nest or leaving the home, the therapist may see a parent, a couple, the emerging adult, the entire family or any combination of those roles. The role of the therapist can be to help those in therapy to gain insight on the meaning of this family cycle change and to provide an encouraging environment where family members can define their personal transition and potentially negotiate their newly created place in this cycle.

**Therapeutic Techniques for Couples**

Couples entering the empty nest stage may need to rediscover what brought them together years ago and to provide an opportunity to define individual and shared goals as they move forward in this stage. Using Adlerian concepts such as the lifestyle assessment and more can provide insight for the couple as they move forward. Lew and Bettner (1996) use the
concept of Crucial Cs in working with children and understanding how children’s behavior is
reflective of their needs. The Crucial Cs are identified as: connect, capable, count, and courage.
McCurdy (2007) brings the use of Crucial Cs and lifestyle assessments together as a tool for
couples counseling and states,

Couples counselors can use lifestyle assessment to understand better and to bring to the
attention of the couple how each partner views his or her place in the world. Marital
relationships are fictive, and counselors can better understand them by assessing each
partner’s lifestyle. These fictions contribute to the daily functioning of the relationship in
both healthy and destructive ways. (p. 279)

Using the concept of the Crucial Cs helps the therapist work with couples in a way that
externalizes the potential fictions to tell their story in a way that is less likely to show blame or
hurt. McCurdy states, “The proposed method for integrating the construct of the Crucial Cs into
couples counseling requires the counselor and couple to work together to increase awareness of
each partner’s mistaken goals that lead to the ineffective behaviors in their relationship” (p. 284).
Based on McCurdy’s description of the Crucial Cs in marriage, Appendix A outlines the feeling
when the C is met, a potential behavior when the need is not met and a treatment intervention for
the couple (McCurdy, 2007, pp. 285-288). This table can be used by the therapist to help
identify both the strengths they have in their relationship and where they need help. The table
provides McCurdy’s (2007) definitions of what it looks like when needs are met, not met and
possible therapeutic interventions.

While much study and emphasis on the family life cycle revolves around the role of
expanding the family and thus, parenting, several researches have created definitions around the
marital subsystem. The focus has been to define developmental marriage cycles that are
applicable to all marriages and that require the effort of both partners to complete each specific developmental task. Nichols and Pace-Nichols (1993) define five marital tasks: commitment, caring, communication, conflict/compromise, and contract (p. 308). These tasks are interwoven throughout the family life cycle and can be used to assess and describe the marital couple as a subset of the family as the family evolves through its life cycle. The marital tasks can be used similarly as the Crucial Cs in assessing a couple. Nichols and Pace-Nichols (1993) define the tasks as both internal and external. Assessing couples based on the definitions provided by Nichols and Pace-Nichols (1993) as:

- **Commitment**: How and to what extent the partners value the relationship and their intentions with regard to its maintenance and continuation. (Attention to this task is exceedingly important because marriage is the only voluntary family relationship and, hence, the most fragile.)

- **Caring**: The kind of emotional attachment that ties the partners to one another. (This term is used instead of the ambiguous term "love." Caring, like commitment, is highly significant because of the nature of mate selection—largely on the basis of personal choice and sentiments—and the fragility of marriage.)

- **Communication**: The ability to communicate verbally and symbolically, to share meanings.

- **Conflict/Compromise**: The ability to recognize and deal with the disagreements that are inevitable in any intimate relationship.

- **Contract**: The set of expectations and explicit, implied, or presumed agreements held by the partners.
Nichols and Pace-Nichols (1993) state, “Use of a marital life cycle perspective with core and specific tasks underlines for clients the fact that marriage is not static and that adaption to new phases and new situations is a normative part of marriage” (p. 310). In using the developmental concept, the therapist can analyze how a couple is doing in each task but also can provide psychoeducation to help couples understand their marital tasks as partners and how improvements in the marital subsystem can positively impact the family.

Another technique for couples’ therapy during this stage is the use of Gottman’s (2000) concept of The Sound Marital House (see Appendix B, C, and D). In this technique, couples examine their relationship using tools that provide an easy way to hold a discussion about what they enjoy about each other and identify how they appreciate each other and define shared goals for the future. A therapist who uses Gottman’s techniques can use them with the couples together, or as homework or optional take home tools.

Using Adlerian concepts with couples provides a cooperative atmosphere to engage the partners in the concept of social interest. Moschetta and Moschetta (1993) state, “Being cooperative, putting a partner’s wishes and desires ahead of one’s own, and extending one’s self to maximize another’s well being all have origin in and flow from that human attribute that Adler called social interest” (p. 399). Seeing marriage as a team where you receive individual joy in putting the other first is an essential Adler concept in marriage.

Moschetta and Moschetta (1993) describe three dimensions of caring in a marital relationship; sustenance caring, intentional caring, and reverent caring. They define sustenance caring as a type that nurtures, supports, and strengthens the other. This is shown in a frequent show of both physical and verbal affection along with a consistent awareness of the other’s thoughts and feelings. Partners demonstrate, in actual behaviors, an unselfish concern for and an
interest in one’s partner. Spouses report that receiving sustenance caring left them feeling loved, happy, sexually responsive, stable, secure, trusting, capable of facing problems, capable of reaching out to others (p. 400). Moschetta and Moschetta (1993) define intentional caring is the expression of a commitment that fosters growth, and conveys a deep interest in the other’s full use of talents, capabilities, and potentials. Intentional caring entails modeling growth, being a counselor, being flexible, cooperative, and willing to compromise and share responsibilities. Receiving intentional caring left spouses feeling courageous, unafraid, more adequate, liberated, more adult, more able to invest themselves, and more capable of fulfilling potentials (p. 401). Lastly, they define reverent caring as valuing each other’s individuality, holding the partner in high esteem and making them a top priority. Reverent caring in a marital relationship shows an intense interest in and admiration for the other (p. 401). Therapists can use these concepts of caring to guide couples in finding strength and growth areas in ways they care for each other.

**Therapeutic Techniques for the Emerging Adult**

The transition from adolescent to adult can come with many stressors. The young adult may be feeling like a teen in one environment and like an adult in another. White (1994) offers the term semi-autonomy in which, “…young adults are away from the control and supervision of their parents but under the authority and supervision of some other agency: (p. 88). Young adults who are living in this gray area of in between may become clients in therapy. Useful treatment methods would include encouragement, use of the lifestyle assessment to help them discover their own unique self, and use of the life tasks self measurement (see Appendix F).

Other tools that have been used with college student support groups are those of family sculpting and family choreography (Lawson, 1988). Lawson states, “Family sculpting allows individual group members to arrange other group members and objects into physical and spatial
configurations that reflect family relationships as the sculptor sees them” (p. 246). Further, family choreography takes family sculpting and uses movement to show shifting patterns in the family relationships. Lawson (1988) states, “Family dynamics such as alliances, triangles, scapegoating, and shifting coallitions are all represented through movement” (p. 246). The use of the family sculpting and choreography techniques in a group setting was found to be a way to move from a self determined role and clients found flexibility and alternative ways to interact with their family members. Lawson concludes that “Family sculpting and choreography allow the examination of preconceived notions about family relationships, which makes insights into self and family dynamics possible” (p. 246). Promoting the client as an individual and providing tools for self discovery will help promote the transition to adulthood.

**Conclusion**

Family and life transitions are expected to be emotional times of change. Taking time to prepare for and identify what the family hopes of the next phase helps all members of the family. As parents, using encouragement and helping children attain autonomy sets the stage for their spring into adulthood to be a positive transition. In today’s environment where children tend to be the focus in families, it is important for couples to prepare for empty nest. There are several factors that will contribute to changes in the future of this family life cycle. One major factor is the older age that couples are when starting families will make them older when they reach the empty nest stage. Possible outcomes of this environmental and cultural shift are many; from the impact of potentially being more financially secure to the possibility that being older can include more health concerns. The family life cycles are evolving, with many children returning home for a time. The positive impact of further establishing adult relationships between parents and adult children will likely impact generations to come. Much of the research I conducted
concluded that this stage is often happy and even euphoric; I believe there is an opportunity to help couples prepare for this new stage by re-establishing or communicating admiration, respect and appreciation.
References


Appendix A:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crucial C</th>
<th>When need is met</th>
<th>When need is not met</th>
<th>Therapeutic Intervention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connect</td>
<td>Individuals who feel connected to each other feel secure as a couple. Partners seek to make connections with each other that contribute to the relationship.</td>
<td>A partner who does not feel connected may seek ways to get their partner’s attention to meet this mistaken goal. The relationship becomes one of insecurity.</td>
<td>Therapist prescribes the symptom by having the individual exaggerate or practice the feeling they are trying to overcome. Communication skills may also need to be an intervention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capable</td>
<td>When an individual believes his or her partner’s capabilities, he or she feels competent both as an individual and as a couple. Partners believe in each other’s growth as well as that of the relationship.</td>
<td>Partner who does not feel capable may try to control or become dependent on the other partner and the relationship may become one of inadequacy.</td>
<td>The therapist can present alternatives to help each partner understand how they evaluate and understand each other. If each partner is willing to accept new ideas look at alternatives based on their partner’s strengths, they will feel more capable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>A partner who feels their partner counts feels that their relationship is valuable. They understand there is a purpose to their relationship.</td>
<td>A partner who does not feel valuable may try to hurt the other partner before he or she is hurt to seek revenge for being hurt. The relationship becomes one of insignificance.</td>
<td>Constructive alternatives can be presented by the therapist to help distinguish facts from impressions. The goal is to increase feelings of mutual existence and equality in the relationship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courage</td>
<td>A partner who believes their partner is courageous feels confident, hopeful and able to take risks with their partner.</td>
<td>A partner who does not feel confident in the relationship may avoid their partner. The relationship becomes one of inferiority.</td>
<td>The therapist may use a technique where each partner makes a statement through the therapist who then positively reframes the message to the other partner.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Appendix B:

The Sound Marital House
John M. Gottman, Ph.D.

Creating Shared Meaning

Avoiding Marital Gridlock

Conflict Regulation

Positive Sentiment Override

Turning Toward Versus Turning Away

Fondness and Admiration System

Love Maps

3 Goals
Increase positivity during conflict
Increase positivity during non-conflict
Decrease negativity during conflict
Real Map of Your Partner’s Everyday Life

Ask questions and fill in the list below for your partner.

The Cast of Characters in your partner’s life:

Friends:

Potential Friend:

Rivals, competitors, “enemies”:

Recent Important Events (What has occurred recently that is important?)

Upcoming Events (what is your partner looking forward to?)

Current stresses (what are some current stresses in your partner’s life?)

Current worries (what is your partner worried about?)

Hopes and aspirations (for self? For others?)
Appendix D:

Gottman “I Appreciate…” Adjective Checklist

Instructions: It is very important to examine the positive aspects of your partner’s personality. Many times when people are upset with one another they lose sight of all these positive aspects of the partner and of the relationship. If these positive areas of a partner or of the marriage get acknowledged and discussed, change is often more possible and exploring these areas that you appreciate may have positive consequences. For a few moments, we’d like you to think about your selected aspects of your partner’s personality. Even if there was only one instance of this characteristic in your partner’s personality, we’d like you to think about it. Circle three to five items that you think are characteristic, even slightly, of your partner at times. For each item you check, briefly think of an actual incident that really happened that illustrates this characteristic of your partner. You will then share this incident with your partner.

1. Loving
2. Sensitive
3. Brave
4. Intelligent
5. Thoughtful
6. Generous
7. Loyal
8. Truthful
9. Strong
10. Energetic
11. Sexy
12. Decisive
13. Creative
14. Imaginative
15. Fun
16. Attractive
17. Interesting
18. Supportive
19. Funny
20. Considerate
21. Affectionate
22. Organized
23. Resourceful
24. Athletic
25. Cheerful
26. Coordinated
27. Graceful
28. Elegant
29. Gracious
30. Playful
31. Caring
32. A great friend
33. Exciting
34. Thrifty
35. Planful
36. Committed
37. Involved
38. Expressive
39. Active
40. Careful
41. Reserved
42. Adventurous
43. Receptive
44. Reliable
45. Responsible
46. Dependable
47. Nurturing
48. Warm
49. Virile
50. Kind
51. Gentle
52. Practical
53. Lusty
54. Witty
55. Relaxed
56. Beautiful
57. Handsome
58. Rich
59. Calm
60. Lively
61. A great partner
62. A great parent
63. Assertive
64. Protective
65. Sweet
66. Tender
67. Powerful
68. Flexible
69. Understanding
70. Totally Silly
71. Shy
72. Vulnerable

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Appendix E:

Additional Resources

http://marriage.about.com/cs/midlife/a/emptynest.htm

http://www.emptynestsupport.com/

http://www.marriagealive.com/index.cfm

http://www.gottman.com/

http://www.aamft.org/iMIS15/AAMFT/
Appendix F

- FAMILY
- SELF
- SPIRITUALITY
- COMMUNITY
- FRIENDS
- LOVE
- WORK