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Empty-nesters benefit when the children fly the coop

By [Sharon Jayson](#), USA TODAY

Don't send the kids away just yet, but new research shows that an empty nest can help mom and dad's marriage.

It's not that spending more time together makes the difference. Instead, the study by University of California-Berkeley psychologists found that an empty nest benefits the marriage because couples have more fun during the time they spend together. It's quality time, not quantity time, says lead author Sara Gorchoff.

"The empty nest isn't a panacea that's making everything in their lives better, but it does have a specific impact on having better marriages because women are enjoying time with their partners more after the kids are gone," she says. "The time they're spending is more fun and relaxed and enjoyable."

The study, reported in the journal *Psychological Science* in November, followed the same 123 women at ages 43, 52 and 61 through questionnaires and interviews, and it found that their marital satisfaction increased as they aged. Whether it was a first marriage or a re-marriage didn't matter.

Gorchoff says that even though marital satisfaction increased, overall life satisfaction did not — which suggests that the benefits of an empty nest were specifically related to the marriage.

Psychiatrist Terry Eagan of Santa Monica, Calif., who was not involved in the study, says there are several reasons women may have less life satisfaction as they age, including "their own body changes, their own personal unfinished business in their life — the regrets people have."

Natalie Caine founded Empty Nest Support Services to help those through the transition. She says that it's easy to understand how quality time improves a relationship, but that many couples find it awkward to be in a house without kids, and it takes time to adjust. "They're suffering, and shocked that they're suffering. They thought they were prepared. The reality hits when the house is silent and it's just the two of you."

Rosemary Richie, 60, is a mother of five kids, ages 27 to 38, and operates a preschool in Berkeley, Calif. She says her second husband of 33 years had long reminded her that their relationship would transcend the parenting part.

"When you have so many kids and are both working and very involved in the community, we would only see each other in passing — that's how I felt for many years," she says. "He reminded me they would be gone some day and it would be just two of us."

The women in the longitudinal study are now 70 years old; they are primarily white, college-educated and generally satisfied with their marriages. Gorchoff says her team is now studying data that include men and women, ethnic minorities and individuals with less education for a broader perspective.