



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Empty Nest – Part 2

Guest(s): Judy Berry and Panel

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Dr. James Dobson: You're listening to Family Talk, the radio broadcasting division of the James Dobson Family Institute. I am that James Dobson, and I'm so pleased that you've joined us today.

Roger Marsh: Empty nest. It's a term commonly used to describe parents who used to have a full house of children, but now those kids have grown up and headed off into adulthood. Bedroom messes, family room movie nights, noisy sleepovers: Those have all been replaced with peace and quiet, right? But also, a sense of longing for the good old days on the part of the parents.

Welcome to Family Talk with your host, psychologist, and best-selling author, Dr. James Dobson. I'm Roger Marsh. We're about to hear the second installment in a classic four-part series titled "Empty Nest." For this recording, Dr. Dobson invited a panel of four women who have experienced the empty nest syndrome and lived to tell the tale. Dr. Dobson begins today's discussion by asking this key question of one of our panelists.

Dr. James Dobson: Sunny, how about your husband?

Sonya Wark: Well, he was very close to Sandy. That was our youngest daughter. And when she went away to college, it was pretty hard on him. But as I've said before, we were really fortunate because we still have two sons here in Southern California, so he can get in touch with them when he wants to, and we get together fairly often.

I have noticed, lately in particular, that he will call me from the office and say, "I just talked to Tricia," or, "I just talked to Sandy." And he calls them from the office, which is something he didn't ever used to do. I was always the one that made a phone...

Dr. James Dobson: So, you kind of have drawn the same conclusion Sally has, that he's feeling an emptiness inside.

Sonya Wark: I think our family has come to mean a lot more to Bob than it used to. When your children leave home, in one way, it's sort of good that you now have some time to think more about how you really do feel and to decide how you really

want to relate to them. When you have four children at home and everybody's coming and going, sometimes you're just so busy you can't even think straight. This is sort of neat, that we now have relationships with each one of them individually that maybe we didn't have time to have before. And certainly with Bob, I would say that he's closer now to the children on a one-to-one basis than he ever was while they were growing up.

Beth Brown: I see my kids watching my face as I talk about anticipating the empty nest. Six months ago, I used to say, "Oh, it's not that far away, and I'm going to really miss you." And they're reading my face and studying it and saying, "I wonder what she's really feeling." And then I talk about it more and they'll say, "Well, mom, it's a year away." Now, that it's getting closer, they're initiating it. If we've talked about what we feel like, what our husbands feel about this, I see it in the last to go, that they're starting to see that we're the ones who are emptying the nest. And are mom and dad going to be okay, especially this good... Are they going to be okay when we go? Because they're going to feel somewhat responsible for our pain. So, I really believe in talking about it a lot.

It's fun. I've said to the kids, "Now, I love you and I'm enjoying you so much and have enjoyed you from day one. We have had fun together. And when you leave, I'm going to cry for about two weeks, and then dad and I are going to have the time of our life." And we plan to really have a good time because, as I say, as your children pull away, you and your husband have this time that you're talking about, Sunny.

Sonya Wark: I get to travel with Bob now when he goes on business because I don't work outside the home. Those are really special to me. I really love it. I think our son David just said to me the other day when we had to go on another trip to Las Vegas and back and he said, "I'm really glad to see you and dad being able to do this." He has a really neat relationship with his dad that way, in that he phoned him at the office and said, "How are you? I haven't seen you for a while." That kind of thing. It's more of just a really relaxed, happy friendship. I really love it. I really do.

Sally Marston: And I think, Sunny, something that you said I think is happening for us: I see my husband really growing closer to the children. They're not really children anymore. They're adults. But I see that relationship growing closer together. He was so busy working, spending so much of his time and energy with his work when they were growing up, and now that they're gone, I think he's realizing the importance of their relationships. So, he really is actively working at the relationships now.

Sonya Wark: Well, especially with our boys because all three of them are in business, and Bob shares with the boys troubles he's having at the office or things that are bothering him, and they get to share back with him.

Dr. James Dobson: Almost a peer relationship has developed.

Sonya Wark: Yeah. It's really sort of neat. That's sort of a special thing, I think.

Dr. James Dobson: We touched a moment ago on the reaction of your sons and daughters in leaving. I'd like to explore that a little more. Were you the only ones that hurt in that departure, or did you have evidence that they were lonely and felt kind of thrown out of the nest, too?

Judy Berry: Oh. Most definitely. With our daughter who just left in September, she wept uncontrollably as we turned to say goodbye as I was trying to be brave on her behalf because we had had a rather painful parting at home. Several of her friends from high school had come to say goodbye to her. She left, so she said, "Mom, you drive." And she held onto a stuffed animal that her friend had given to her at the moment of departure, and I drove and she ultimately cried and slept all the way to San Diego. It was exciting for her, but the realization that she had also that it was the end of an era, and that she was in a new place, it was very painful. But she called home within about three days and said, "This is the most wonderful experience. I am so happy here."

Dr. James Dobson: She got over it quickly.

Judy Berry: And so that helped me.

Dr. James Dobson: How about the others? Sunny?

Sonya Wark: I can remember Sandy going away to Forest Home for, I think, it was three weeks on a stress camp. I think it was probably the first time she'd been away from home that long, which seems strange, but she said afterwards, "I know I can make it now. I know I can make it. I didn't know what it would be like to be away from you and dad." She's one of those people that likes to know she can make it before she has to make it. So, that was a good time for her.

Beth Brown: It's fun to hear the conversation turn this way because when we talk about empty nest, there's sort of a negative feel to that. What I think's coming out of our conversation and every piece of it that we've touched is that mixture. There's the pain of the separation and there's the thrill of the new autonomy and the new independence, and we see it happening to our children and we feel the new freedoms ourself.

Dr. James Dobson: It's not unlike birth because if the child stayed in the uterus, he couldn't grow. He could only get so big and his development could not continue. And then there's the painful birth process, painful for mother and child, and then there is the independence in a new life. In some ways, it is that pressing off into a new world that stresses both generations but has the potential for such new growth, in both, perhaps.

Beth Brown: And to stretch your analogy, almost the relief that the birth process is over.

Beth Brown: I made it!

Sally Marston: I made it. Yeah.

Beth Brown: I think that feeling comes at empty nest that, yes, my primary parenting years have completed. That task that God gave me is done. And though we say we're always a parent, there is a new kind of parenting, and those years of dependency leading that child into independence and interdependence are over. And that's a wonderful feeling.

Dr. James Dobson: That's well said. Judy, do you feel the birth process is over now? In the last two years you've done a lot of grieving. Are you past it now?

Judy Berry: I have worked my way through the pain. Yes, I have. It doesn't mean that the poignancy is not gone. I almost feel poignant about just the name of a day. I mean, poignancy is my middle name.

Dr. James Dobson: You could cry right now, couldn't you? Couldn't you?

Judy Berry: But I have worked my way through that process by recognizing that it was first I felt a sense of loss, and then that grief set in, and then I began accepting it. Really, basically, I think one of the things that helped me the most was I began thanking God for what He had done in the lives of my children and for what I knew He was in the process of doing in their lives at that moment. That was a real turning point for me, when I began focusing my eyes on the person of God, not on my feelings. When I began giving praise to God for what He was doing, the picture began to change.

At Christmastime, I shared this with you already, I experienced something that my friends are still laughing about. They said, "I never thought I would hear you say this." And Brad and Kim, if you're listening to this, it's all right. You know I love you. But when the end of Christmas vacation was over and they had been home for a month and they went back to San Diego to college, I said...

Dr. James Dobson: It was okay, wasn't it?

Judy Berry: ... bye-bye. And I turned and came back in and I said, "Paul, the house is ours again."

Dr. James Dobson: Isn't that something?

Judy Berry: We're together.

Dr. James Dobson: That transformation is taking place.

Judy Berry: I think that's God's grace and it's growth and it's the way God intended for it to be.

Dr. James Dobson: Has anyone else gotten above and beyond it? Sunny, have you made it?

Sonya Wark: Oh, yeah. I think most definitely. To me, this is a really exciting time for me. I seem to be talking about Sandy a bit, but she's graduating from college this year. She was home at Christmastime and I said to her, "You know, in a way, we're both in the same spot." She's going to go on with the rest of her life and find out what she wants to do with it, and so am I. I have certain talents and certain gifts that I want to find some way I can use them just as she's doing it, so we're not unlike each other.

Dr. James Dobson: But you haven't found that any more than she has yet, right?

Sonya Wark: I think I have a little more wisdom than she has, and I'm a little more aware of what I've got to offer.

Dr. James Dobson: But do you know who you are and where you're going yet?

Sonya Wark: No.

Dr. James Dobson: Do you know what you want to do with the rest of your life?

Sonya Wark: No, I really don't.

Dr. James Dobson: And so you are kind of searching through that as she is?

Sonya Wark: Yes. How do I use what I have?

Sally Marston: Well, I think I know for me, at this time in my life... My husband and I were married very young. I was 19. Had my daughter when I was 21. So, I stopped. I was a year from graduating from college at that point and took my role as mother very seriously. Our daughter was a very special blessing to us at that time, even though it was a disappointment for me not to finish school. So, these years now, with the children both gone, I look forward to new ministry and new learning, and I look at it as starting life anew and looking forward to what God would have in store for me and for my husband.

Dr. James Dobson: So, it's a new era.

Sally Marston: It is.

Dr. James Dobson: There is some excitement.

Sally Marston: It's exciting. It is. It's wonderful.

Sonya Wark: I sort of panicked a few years ago when everybody was in high school or just beginning college, and I went out and tried to have a career as a travel agent and, well, I say I failed miserably. I didn't really, but it wasn't a career that was

meant for me. I think now I'm trying very hard not to rush into something because I don't quite know what I do want to do. The bottom line for me is that I am a caregiving kind of person, and I feel that instead of denying that and trying to become a "businesswoman," surely there's a way a caregiving person can still give care.

Beth Brown:

Yeah. I think this speaks to me about the role that our churches can play in really helping women, not at empty nest, but as they approach it through their child-raising years to begin to understand who they are and how they can contribute, and to provide meaningful ways for women to serve each other and in the church. It's not necessary to make a total change in who you are, to now have a totally new identity, but if there's that understanding of who you are and anticipating that, yes, someday these years of freedom will be there, and knowing what you're going to do.

I've been really happy that I'm a teacher and that part of me will continue on as my children leave. So, it's not all new. I don't have all new questions. The relationship at home will be different and with them will be different. But there's still that part of me that continues on that helps.

I think some of the real pain comes for women who have said, "What I am is a mother," and though that's so beautiful and important, if that's all that you see yourself as, when that role is stripped away, then what's left? And that's very empty. That's where the word empty comes from.

Dr. James Dobson:

Beth, what does that say to the mother who is a homemaker and that is her desire in life, that's where her satisfaction comes from? Are you really saying that she ought to do more or be more or have more?

Beth Brown:

No, I'm not saying that at all. I praise the Lord for 12 years of when I first inherited this group of children and had the girls to add to it, that I was home full-time and enjoying that full-time. It's a very good choice for many women. It's one of a number of choices women have now. But if your choice is to stay home full-time there are still more pieces to you than the parenting role, so that what do you like to do? What are your interests? What are your gifts? How are you using those in your church or your community? Those pieces that can continue on when the children are no longer there.

Dr. James Dobson:

I think this is probably the heart and soul of this program. I think this...

Judy Berry:

I do, too.

Dr. James Dobson:

... may be the most important point because I remember three or four years ago, when Danae was just about ready to leave and Ryan was about 13, Shirley began looking at herself very critically and trying to decide exactly who she was. She went through a time of reevaluation. I think it's important to do that.

Sally Marston: I do, too.

Dr. James Dobson: It's not that the mothering role or the homemaking role, if that is a full-time responsibility, is not significant, but it does mean you're going to be changing and you better start getting ready for it so you don't fall off a cliff when that last child gets in the car and you leave him wherever you're going to leave him and come driving home.

Judy, that's some of what you were experiencing. How could you have prepared? How could you have gotten ready? I know you were thinking about this because we heard it on tape. How could you have reduced your pain if you had really known what was coming three or four years earlier?

Judy Berry: I don't know that I could have reduced my pain. But as I was growing up, I have a wonderful heritage, and my parents instilled in me the fact that when you give your life to the Lord, he does indeed direct you on a daily basis.

Looking back in retrospect, I can see how because I am a violinist and I have loved to teach, I have always wanted to teach children. About seven years ago, a woman approached me and said, "I would like for you to teach my daughter violin." And my first response was I just threw my head back and laughed. And then I got to thinking, "Hmm. That doesn't sound so bad." I didn't know at that time, but that was the beginning of the process of the Lord was opening the door for me to begin using the talents that He had given to me. It just grew and grew as something that I could do in the home. It grew to the point of where I could take as many students as I have because my children are now away in college, so it has met a real emotional need in me where I can pour out the love that I have on other people's children on a daily basis as they come in and out of my house.

Dr. James Dobson: Sally, what was behind your decision to seek employment? You haven't worked all through the years?

Sally Marston: Well, I hope I can share this without some tears. I had to go to work because we were having some serious financial problems, which occurred right when we were just beginning to go through the empty nest syndrome. We discovered that my husband is a compulsive gambler, and that was something that was very, very difficult for me to handle, and...

Dr. James Dobson: You had not known that before?

Sally Marston: No, I had not known that. I had suspected that there was a problem, but I hadn't known how severe the problem was. That happened to surface about three years ago.

Dr. James Dobson: Just at the time that your kids were leaving.

Sally Marston: Right. So, actually, what's happened is this particular crisis in our family has far outweighed...

Dr. James Dobson: The departure.

Sally Marston: ... our feelings and our concerns for the departure of the children. In fact, our children have really ministered to both my husband and I through this time in such a special way. I don't know if we could have made it without them. And...

Dr. James Dobson: That was a tough time, wasn't it, Sally?

Sally Marston: Very.

Dr. James Dobson: Have you overcome it?

Sally Marston: Well...

Dr. James Dobson: Where are you now?

Sally Marston: I believe right now that the Lord has been there so unbelievably. We have experienced His grace in ways that I couldn't even begin to tell you about, as our marriage is still together, which is a miracle because we really went through some difficult times and we were very close, many times, to separating. So, I feel like we are really coming out of it now. It's been three years, and I see God bringing my husband and I closer together. I see some healing going on in both of our lives.

Dr. James Dobson: But an interesting thing has happened. You went to work out of financial necessity, but now that is the bridge to the post-parenting life for you.

Sally Marston: It is. I had never worked before, and I'd wanted to work as the children were getting into school, and my husband said, "No, you're a mother and you really need to stay home with our children." So, even then, before I knew the Lord, I was obedient to my husband, and I feel like God has given me and blessed me not only twice fold but sevenfold because I'm working in a situation where I've been ministered to through the crisis.

Dr. James Dobson: George Gilder was here several months ago and was talking about his book *Men and Marriage* and about the feminist notion that women ought to postpone marriage until later and postpone children until later. And even when the children do arrive, who's to say that a woman shouldn't have a career and do the same thing that a man does? As a result, we're seeing families with fewer children and we're seeing the start of the families being postponed. He feels that's a mistake because the primary satisfaction in living is in linking into this heritage of what was handed down to us and what we hand down to the next generation and seeing our children grow and then our grandchildren and so on.

If you substitute a career for that, you are cutting yourself off from this linkage that goes on generation after generation.

But the point that's relevant here is that a woman does not really have to choose between a family and a career. She has plenty of opportunity to have that career and that fulfillment and whatever she wants to do creatively when she gets to where you women are because women live longer than men; they're healthier as they move through the years than men are, and there's all kinds of opportunity out there when you have established this family that will take you into old age and surround you with many quivers in your... What is it? Quivers in your arrow.

Sally Marston: But also, Dr. Dobson, I see that God provided for me through the time when I wasn't able to work and chose not to work, to be involved in volunteer activities in my community. So, those energies and the desire to learn and grow were channeled into things into my church and into being involved in Girl Scouts and PTA, and I got a great sense of fulfillment from that.

Beth Brown: Yeah.

Sally Marston: So, He did provide.

Beth Brown: I think we could do a lot of harm by making women feel that when they reach this stage, that now there's sort of an obligation to go out into the workforce and find a structured career like that.

Dr. James Dobson: Okay, Beth, what are the options to a woman, then?

Beth Brown: I think one option is that, that if there's something you've always wanted to do in the career world outside your home, great. This may be your moment now to prepare and do it. There's lots of time, as you've said. There also may be the option of saying, "What have I been doing all along but couldn't do it to the extent that I wanted to because of the time limitation that I'm now free to do?" There may be a ministry in your church that you've been marginally involved in that now you could take some leadership because you have the time to give to it. Our communities now are hurting for volunteers. Traditionally, women have provided a large volunteer workforce and...

Dr. James Dobson: They're no longer available.

Beth Brown: ... that's no longer available because we're working, and so that kind of voluntary work could be very fulfilling. Also, builds in the flexibility so that, as Sunny said, she can travel with her husband when she'd like to, but can make choices of the flexibility of a volunteer career.

Roger Marsh: Those are important points to consider if you're about to embark on the empty nest season.

On that note, we conclude this edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh. We have reached the midpoint of this classic four-part conversation featuring Dr. Dobson and his in-studio panel of four moms who have weathered the empty nest season and are now sharing their wisdom with our listeners.

Today's discussion centered on how to occupy your time once your kids have left the nest. It's just one of many aspects of empty nesting that are addressed in this series. As you will hear when you visit our broadcast page at drjamesdobson.org. You can listen to all four installments in this series.

While you're there, you'll also find a web exclusive, a portion of this conversation that is not included in our broadcast edition. It confronts the issue of what happens when your children leave home under less-than-ideal circumstances. If you have a black sheep among your adult kids, be sure to click on this exclusive audio content found only at drjamesdobson.org.

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Be sure to join us again next time as our panel returns to continue this informative and eye-opening conversation about how moms can effectively navigate the empty nest season. That's on the next edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, thank you, everyone, for tuning into our program today. You may know that Family Talk is a listener-supported program and we remain on the air by your generosity, literally. If you can help us financially, we would certainly appreciate it. God's blessings to you all.