



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Empty Nest – Part 1

Guest(s): Judy Berry and Panel

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Dr. James Dobson: Welcome everyone to Family Talk. It's a ministry of the James Dobson Family Institute supported by listeners just like you. I'm Dr. James Dobson and I'm thrilled that you've joined us.

Roger Marsh: During the parenting years, many moms and dads spend countless hours investing in the lives of their young children, with the anticipation that one day those kids will grow up to become responsible adults who wind up leaving home and entering adulthood.

When all of the children have moved away, we refer to those parents as empty-nesters, but many times, that season can feel as though it's even more challenging than it was for the moms and dads stuck on diaper duty and homework patrol. Welcome to Family Talk with your host, psychologist, and best-selling author, Dr. James Dobson.

I'm Roger Marsh. On today's broadcast, we're going to revisit a classic conversation Dr. Dobson recorded with a panel of four moms on the subject of embracing the empty nest when your children move out on their own as adults. Here now is Dr. James Dobson to introduce the first member of our panel on today's edition of Family Talk.

Dr. James Dobson: We have four guests in the studio to help us talk about this subject. On my left is Dr. Beth Brown, who was a grandmother at 27 and also has twin daughters who will be entering college in the fall. You want to explain that Beth?

Beth Brown: Always takes a lot to explain this. When I was 21, I married a widower with five children, so those kids are now all grown and empty nested us in phases, and I have grandchild number 10 due in two weeks.

Dr. James Dobson: Is that right?

Beth Brown: Yes.

Dr. James Dobson: That's exciting. 27 years of age.

Beth Brown: Yes. I was a grandparent for the first time, and then we had twins because nothing ever happens normally for me, but God put this unique family together and the twins are now in their last year of high school, so we've never had an empty nest. I married into a full one and we're anticipating that for the first time this Fall.

Dr. James Dobson: How did the teenagers relate to you when you became their mother?

Beth Brown: It was a big change and I asked them to call me Beth. We didn't fake anything and they became my friends.

Dr. James Dobson: But the younger ones called you what?

Beth Brown: The younger ones, when you're nine and 10 years old, someone 21 looks very old and they wanted a mom, so I've been mom to them from day one, and we just let the dad discipline if there was discipline needed for the older kids. I love them as their friend and I kind of grew up with them.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, you have plenty of experience in the turning loose process.

Beth Brown: Yes, I do.

Dr. James Dobson: We'll want to hear about that today. Also with us is Sally Marston. You and your husband, Otis, have watched your daughter and son leave home and become self-sufficient, reasonably self-sufficient, right?

Sally Marston: Yes, very self-sufficient. Actually, our son just has recently become, by his choice, wanted to become independent, financially independent and living away from home on his own, and so we are just really still working that through right now.

Dr. James Dobson: And there have been some complications in that process too, haven't there?

Sally Marston: Yes.

Dr. James Dobson: We want to hear about those. Also with us is Sunny Wark, who has four children. What are their ages at this time?

Sonya Wark: Our oldest daughter is 29, and we have a son who's 28. Actually, those two are the same age for three weeks every year. We then have another son who's 26 and our youngest is 22. A girl, 22.

Dr. James Dobson: Do you feel like you have the job done? Well, I'll ask it another way. Do you ever stop worrying about your kids?

Sonya Wark: I don't think I stop wanting to share insights that I have with them. I want to save them from some of the hurts I know they're going to have. I don't think I

really worry because I really have put them in God's hands and I really think that they're wise enough and that they will figure it out.

Dr. James Dobson: That is probably the most emotional aspect of letting kids go is they're going to get into trouble in the sense of experiencing pain because life is pain and you want to shield them from that, and yet you can't and you want to.

Sally Marston: And yet that's where they grow.

Dr. James Dobson: That's right.

Sonya Wark: And it seems to me that they have difficulty hearing you as a friend who's trying to share wisdom. They still hear you as mom who's trying to tell them what to do and they don't want to hear mom tell them what to do.

Dr. James Dobson: Especially at that age.

Sonya Wark: Especially at that age.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, with us also today is a very familiar voice. It comes from Judy Berry and Judy has been with us so many times. In fact, Judy, we've got a little surprise for you today. I told you at church, I believe the other day because we're good friends-

Judy Berry: I'm almost worried about this.

Dr. James Dobson: We're going to go back now by the magic of tape and we're going to hear your voice in 1979 when we recorded a program called "The Working Mother."

Judy Berry: I think it's a very personal issue where there is no pat answer that applies to every woman, and I only work two days a week outside the home, and I choose to do it that way. If my husband was not supportive of my working part-time, I wouldn't. We could get by but I work for two reasons. The number one, from the time I was a very small child, I wanted to teach and I taught full-time up until the time that I became pregnant with my first child and have not taught full-time since then.

Rather than resign from the school district, I wanted to keep my hand in teaching and so when this 40% position opened up and was offered to me, I took it and I have been with this for 10 years. And God comes first, my husband's second and my children third. My teaching is way down the line in priorities.

Dr. James Dobson: You haven't aged a bit, Judy, you remember that though?

Judy Berry: Oh yes. Very, very well.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, through the magic of tape, we're going to now let you hear your voice two years later in 1981 when we recorded the program called "Mothers and Daughters."

How do all of you feel when I use such phrases as, "The swing set rusty and still," "The bicycle with the flat tires," "Christmas with only two stockings on the fireplace," "Halls that are empty," "Beds that aren't slept in."

Speaker 9: Well, I'm looking forward to that. As much as I love my children, I look forward to that, it'll be different.

Dr. James Dobson: Judy, react to the same thing.

Judy Berry: Well, I look forward to those times too. I'll have to confess that one of my problems, I considered a problem is that I'm overly sentimental, I feel, and I constantly have to deal with myself as an act of my will and not allow myself to be ruled by my emotions. And I did face a crisis time this past September when my son entered high school and the realization that there are really no... there's no child likeness left in Brad, and I don't want him to stay a child. I'm proud of every stage of development, but that little hoarse voice is now a husky voice and it'll be a very sentimental time for me when he leaves for college. I'll be joyful, but I am always, it seems a mixture of dual emotions.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, Judy, at the time that we recorded that program, you were a little apprehensive about Brad and Kim leaving. You've now experienced it. You've been through it. They're both gone. Has the actual experience been more difficult or less so than you expected?

Judy Berry: Oh, more so. The day we took Brad to college, the last words he said to me were, "Mom, don't cry until you get off of the college campus."

Dr. James Dobson: He knew you were going to cry.

Judy Berry: I said, "I promise." So he waved goodbye and I didn't look back, I got in the car, and as we drove out the gates, just everything let loose and it was the most incredibly hurting experience, painful experience, I have ever experienced in my life, ever. It was such a mixture.

I experienced instant flashbacks from the moment he was born through childhood up to that point all the way from San Diego back to Pasadena, and I wept uncontrollably and my husband just drove silently expecting every thing that I did, fortunately accepting it. But I went through a very difficult time of mourning.

Dr. James Dobson: Because of Shirley and my friendship with you and Paul, Judy, I was aware that you were hurting during that time, and I would see you at church and I would

just look at you and you'd cry, and I knew you were going through a hard time. It took you weeks and even months to get your feet under you again, didn't it?

Judy Berry: Yes, it did. And it took me, I would say, his whole first year in college and I had to analyze it, what I was really feeling and why, because it's such a paradox because I would not have changed a thing. I would not have brought him home. I was so proud of him. I had anticipated him going to college. He had done all of the right things. He was in a school where I knew that he was going to grow spiritually as well as academically. I had nothing to cry about, and yet my heart was aching.

Dr. James Dobson: Why Judy?

Judy Berry: Because it was something that was irreversible and I struggle with anything that's irreversible and the greatest love of my life outside of my husband has been my children. I have loved being a mother and all of a sudden it seems like they've grown up and they're gone. And I remember walking in his bedroom after he was gone and just looking through the things on his dresser and picking them up and holding them and weeping, just it was a loss. He was gone never to return in the same way and yet if you had have asked me, "Do you want him to return in the same way?" I would've said no.

And I had to finally talk with him about it. He was a good listener because I think it's very easy for adult children who have left home to interpret their mother's grief as that of trying to hold on. And I said to him, "Brad, I am not trying to hold on to you. I purposefully released you your senior year in high school." Which we did.

Dr. James Dobson: You were just mourning the end of an era.

Judy Berry: Yes, and that's what I said. I have decided it's a grief process that I have to work my way through and then I'm going to be able to rejoice in the things that are to come, and I'm now finding myself beginning to do that.

Dr. James Dobson: Did the others of you struggle in the same way? Did you feel some of the same things, Sally?

Sally Marston: Yes, I hear what she's saying about a paradox. Our daughter just recently graduated from college in December, and actually it's been December, it's been a year, almost a year and a half now. And she came back home and we discussed, she was wanting to find a job and wanting to find work and get settled and I said, well, I assumed that she was going to come home and find a job and settle and live with us for a little while until she could get on her feet. And she said, 'No, mom, I'm going back to Santa Barbara. I'm going to find a place there and get a job.'

And I had this feeling inside of me like, "No, I don't want you to go. I want you to stay, Lisa." And yet then I was fighting with it because I said, "No," in talking with the Lord. I said, "You raise your children to become independent," and I was really struggling with that. Here, she was wanting her independence, and yet I wanted her at home. I wanted my little girl back and I knew I couldn't have her back and at that point, I think as I struggled and prayed over it, I released her again to the Lord, but in a different way.

Dr. James Dobson: But there were those contradictory emotions. You knew what was best for her, but it wasn't what you wanted emotionally.

Sally Marston: Absolutely.

Dr. James Dobson: Sunny, how about yourself? When your youngest left, what did you feel?

Sonya Wark: I cried. I certainly relate when we left her at college. Actually, she was the one that we really did that with. The rest... When we left Portland to come down here, we left our oldest daughter there, and then the two boys went to college in southern California. So with Sandy, it was really my first experience of taking her to college and I can remember unpacking her clothes for her and my husband looking at me as if to say, "Hey, she can really do this for herself."

However, I did make it off campus and we went for breakfast and it's the first time in my life I can ever remember not being able to eat. I cried and cried and cried. It was just, it was just horrendous. It was just terrible to leave her there and to come home. Even though I had looked forward to the empty nest and even though I had two sons to visit, it was really hard.

Dr. James Dobson: Did you experience the same flashbacks that Judy's talking about? Remembering the toddler years and the preschool years and the elementary school years and all the little events that took place, has that come floating through your mind?

Sonya Wark: I vaguely remember thinking those kind of things. I don't know that I remember them as clearly as Judy did. I just realized I was going to miss her so much. My daughter is a very bubbly kind of person and she's extremely messy.

Dr. James Dobson: And you miss that?

Sonya Wark: No, I can't honestly say that I miss that, but on the other hand, it's sort of fun to watch somebody who seems to be always overflowing with books and papers and things. She's always dropping-

Dr. James Dobson: Brings life into the house.

Judy Berry: That's right, my daughter's that way too. I know.

Dr. James Dobson: Beth, how about yourself?

Beth Brown: Well, I'm thinking this is going to happen next fall, and yet I'm identifying with all the paradox of emotions as I think of all the points in raising our kids that there is separation. I mean, I've practiced for next fall already. I've announced already, "I will cry when you leave."

But I was thinking of how good God is to have this separation not happen, just a quick tearing apart, but that the girls have been separating from us over the years. I mean, I cried when I dropped them both off at their kindergarten room and they turned and said, "Mrs. Brown, you may go now." And there was this quiet-

Dr. James Dobson: Mrs. Brown, please go now.

Beth Brown: And this pain, it was like, I'm relinquishing them. And I think of all the separations we've had with, I mean, I cried in first grade, the first day of school because that meant all day long. And Don said to me, my husband said to me, "Are you going to do this every year?"

By second grade, I was all right. But I think of the times that God takes them away to camp for a week and they separate or the overnights and that as they're through high school, their schedule has gotten so intense that they're separating already in a very healthy way, the way we want them to separate.

Dr. James Dobson: I wonder how your husbands reacted. I remember taking Danae out to the bus on the day that she first went to kindergarten, that you're talking about Beth, and I picked her up and I put her on that first step of the bus and I backed up and I took her picture, we still have that little picture. And that walk back to the house, that 50 yards, was the longest walk of the year for me and seeing that bus drive off, because as you said, Judy, it was irreversible.

It was a change that I could not bring back. It was something that was irretrievable and there is something about the permanence of that that puts a lump in my throat. Just knowing that it's beyond reach, that era is over, dead, closed, and nothing could reopen it.

Beth Brown: I'm glad you brought up the business about fathers. I came across a study recently that said 22% of the fathers in that study found an extreme unhappiness at the empty nest. We think of it as a woman's issue but it really affects some dads profoundly and it appeared to be dads that were older, dads that were very nurturing. Some dads that were having marital conflict and realize they were going to face that alone without the child in the home.

But not for all parents. This is not an unhappy experience for everyone. For many, it's a time of relief and freedom and they're focused on those parts of it, but it's not always just the moms. Some dads really find this very painful.

Dr. James Dobson: You have a Ph.D. in educational psychology, don't you?

Beth Brown: Yeah, and I focused in human development, so when this issue came up, I perked up to it to say, "Well, I know I study it. It's now very personal."

Dr. James Dobson: I have an article in front of me. In fact, it was reported in USA Today, but the study was done at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, and they asked 189 couples whose son or daughter was a college freshman to report on what we're talking about here, how stressful it was when that individual left home.

And surprisingly, the fathers took it harder than the mothers. The details, and I won't read the entire article, are they were significantly more preoccupied with their child and had difficulty getting the youngster out of their minds, speaking of fathers. They were also more likely to have psychosomatic health problems around the time that the child left home.

And one of the explanations for it is regret. Fathers had been so busy and had been working so hard trying to build their business or succeed in their profession or whatever they were doing, that they suddenly realized that it was too late to build a relationship with the children and they were gone and that sense of having lost something that was irretrievable now came in on them.

How did your husbands react to it? Judy, I guess Paul had more difficulty with your daughter leaving home than with Brad, right?

Judy Berry: I think perhaps, we've talked about it just this week, and as I've been getting ready for, anticipating the program, Paul and Kim are like two peas and a pod. She is definitely his daughter, and one thing I have missed so much is just the going back and forth between the two of them as they get into discussions. And they're so alike in their approaches to things, they can't see their likeness when they get into issues where they're arguing over something and I can sit back and laugh at them because they will get after one another for the very traits that they are exhibiting at that moment.

Dr. James Dobson: That they share.

Judy Berry: That's right, and I have missed that, and I asked Paul just this week, "How would you describe your feelings at having our second child, our last child, leaving and being away at college?" And his answer was, "It's been a time of real introspection for me as to where do I go from here?" Almost more of a, I think a midlife crisis is a little too strong, but in some respects-

Dr. James Dobson: Midlife reevaluation, is what I called it.

Judy Berry: Yes, that's it. What is my role other than paying the incredible bills at accumulate with two in college at the same time, and where am I going from this point?

Sally Marston: Our nest is empty now for the first time since January of this year. Our son just recently has chosen to become independent and live on his own, and he'd been gone about two weeks and we really needed to give him some space to breathe. He was really kind of clawing for his independence at that point, and so my husband turned to me. We were sitting watching TV one night and he said, "Well, why don't we call our son?" And I said, "Well, I think maybe it would be better if we wait until he calls us the first time."

Dr. James Dobson: You think your husband was feeling that need for contact?

Sally Marston: I said that he was really feeling the need to touch base, to make contact, and I know they're very close, and I know he missed him, but he didn't share that but I could tell because then the next day he said, "Well, why don't we go ahead and call him?" And I said, "Well, maybe we ought to wait a couple more days." So then we called him that weekend.

But he's usually the one now to initiate calling the children to talk with them and share, and we usually do that every couple of weeks now but it always usually comes from him.

Roger Marsh: How interesting to see how parents respond to their adult children once those kids become adults who move away and go off into the world of adulthood. On today's edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, we've gone back into our broadcast archives to revisit a conversation Dr. Dobson had with a panel of four moms who are veterans of empty-nesting. They're offering some practical advice for us today.

If you have recently moved into empty nest territory or if you're about to enter there, be sure you're with us for the remainder of this broadcast week. We have three more episodes to share with you on this important topic. Of course, as with all of our audio programming, you'll find today's broadcast archived on our broadcast page at drjamesdobson.org. You're especially encouraged to click there today because we have a special web extra waiting for you as well.

If you are the parent of a prodigal or the launch into the empty nest season was rough because of some conflict between you and one of your adult children, you'll want to listen to the web-only release available exclusively at drjamesdobson.org.

Then be sure to take a look at our Facebook page and join the conversation about today's broadcast there. You'll find valuable insights and meaningful dialogue on this subject of empty nesting when you go to facebook.com/drjamesdobson.

Finally, thanks for your prayers and ongoing financial support of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. This program is completely listener supported. We rely on God through your tax-deductible financial contributions to help us continue in

the work to which he has called us. You can make your contribution over the phone when you call toll-free at 877-732-6825.

You can make your donation securely online when you go to drjamesdobson.org. I'm Roger Marsh. Thanks so much for listening today. Be sure to join us again next time as our panel returns to discuss how parents can transition into 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. Tim Clinton: Hi, this is Dr. Tim Clinton. Thanks for listening to Family Talk. You going through a tough time right now? Can't see your way out. You think there's no hope. We'd love to talk to you. I want you to know this. Dr. Dobson has been doing this for a long time and he really cares about you so much that we'd love to talk to you right now.

You can actually call us toll-free. Our number is 877-732-6825. You're going to be encouraged. You're going to be challenged. You're going to find new hope. You know why? Because God really does care about you. He loves you, and Dr. Dobson cares about you too. Call us now, 877-732-6825.