



## Broadcast Transcript

**Broadcast:** The Kids Are Gone: Now What? – Part 1

**Guest(s):** David and Claudia Arp

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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:** Welcome to Family Talk, I'm Roger Marsh. We are a listener-supported program, so thank you for all you do to support us, and thank you for your feedback, which encourages us to keep bringing you relevant content. We're glad that you've joined us for today's program, it's quite encouraging. And who couldn't use some good news in this day and age right now, right?

Well, if you are married and you have kids, when your last child leaves home, a new phase of your marriage begins. Many couples struggle to adjust to this new chapter of life. In today's classic broadcast, Dr. Dobson interviews Dave and Claudia Arp and the three discuss eight challenges that couples face in the empty nesters stage. They offer wonderful solutions and practical tips for any couple who wants to connect and grow together.

The Arps have written a book entitled *The Second Half of Marriage: Facing the Eight Challenges of Every Long-Term Marriage*. That book is the basis in part for today's and tomorrow's programs. The Arps are the founders of Marriage Alive International, a wonderful organization that is built to support your marriage with resources and engaging speakers. The Arps have written over 30 books and have been married for over 55 years. Well, there's a lot of practical and wonderful illustrations to learn from this sweet couple, so let's get started. Here now is Dr. James Dobson.

**Dr. James Dobson:** How do you define the second half? What does that really mean?

**David Arp:** Well, it's an ambiguous term and we mean it to be an ambiguous term because we know it as the empty nester, everybody recognizes that, but in our culture today, for many couples the nest is not empty or it empties to refill or couples have gotten married later in life or remarried so they may have adult kids, they may have kids in grade school, they can even have preschool.

**Claudia Arp:** We call this the Pampers and the Depends generation, because you can have toddlers and aging parents at the same time.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah, well, I'm not sure that's a very exciting prospect for the future.

Claudia Arp: But it is an ambiguous time, that's why we coined the phrase second half of marriage, because empty nest, well, you know what we're talking about. When we went into the empty nest and came back and couldn't find any resources, we decided to do our own research. So, we did a national survey to find out what was going on in long-term marriages. And from that we came up with the eight challenges that we wrote about in our book, *The Second Half of Marriage*. But the one thing we discovered is that transitional times in marriage many times are the risky times. We give help to couples when they're getting married, when they're becoming parents, when they have adolescents, but we're not giving a lot of help to couples who are going into the empty nest. In the past it wasn't a problem because people didn't live as long. You got married, you had your family, you raised your family, they left and you died. But today, you have a whole nother marriage out there. The greatest bulk of your marriage may be the empty nest years.

We find that couples look around and they've come through the turbulent adolescent years, they're emotionally drained, they are emotionally disconnected from each other. And if they haven't worked to maintain that intimacy and that friendship factor over the parenting years, then they don't know each other. They look at that other bird in the empty nest and think, "Wow, another 30 years, I don't think so." And we just see this happening time and time again.

Dr. James Dobson: I know that what you're saying is true because I've seen it, I've observed it. I think it's just a serious problem, which is why I wanted you to be here today. I can't identify with it personally. You talk in the book about being friends between a husband and wife. Shirley's my best friend. I mean, that's not propaganda, she really is. She's a very special lady and I cannot imagine not spending the rest of my life with a person that I've laid this foundation with. She's one of the few remaining human beings on earth who remembers when I was young. Not even sure that I do. But our college days we had a storybook romance and through the years we have laughed and we've traveled and we've had such a wonderful time together. It is sad that so many couples do not have that when the kids are gone, that they look at one another and don't have that reservoir of friendship to build on. That's what you're talking about, isn't it?

Claudia Arp: It is. We also discovered that couples need to actually reinvent their marriage. When you get to the empty nest, everything changes. We live the first half of our marriage more reactive. We're parenting our children, we're building our careers, and our marriages because we are parents are very child-focused. And then when the kids leave home, we lose our buffers, the kids are our buffers, and everything changes. If couples could just realize here's a chance in the second half to reinvent your relationship and to become partner-focused and to shore up that friendship and deepen it.

Dr. James Dobson: Claudia, what do you say to a woman who looks at you and says, "Claudia, my children have been my whole life. They have been my ministry. I felt God gave me that responsibility. And now they seem to get along quite well without me. I wait for the phone to ring and they're into their own lives. How do I start about reinventing myself, redefining who I am?"

Claudia Arp: Boy, that's a good question. It's one I've been asked really a lot of times.

Dr. James Dobson: I'm sure you have.

Claudia Arp: So many mothers have been taught that their role in life is to be a mother. And it's a very, very important role, but it's not the only role. When the kids leave home, we were at a party not too long ago and one mom whose youngest child was going off to college she says, "Wow, now I've got to decide who I want to be when I grow up." And so, we would encourage that mom, that dad to look at their relationship and see how they can re-energize their marriage. It's a time too when many women go back to school, go back and pursue a career perhaps they put on hold.

Dr. James Dobson: That's all right too.

Claudia Arp: And that's all right too.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah. Again, without too many personal references, although I do tend to do that occasionally, Shirley, when she was through with the responsibilities for the kids, she asked herself, "What's next?" And the National Day of Prayer was handed to her right at that time. And the Lord is using her in a marvelous way now that she has those other responsibilities taken care of. That's the ideal thing, isn't it, Dave?

David Arp: Well, it is. What we see happening, it's very interesting, because when we get to the stage of life, oftentimes men have achieved their potential, wherever they're going to go in their businesses, they've arrived, and they start looking back towards home. They want to become more closely attached to their wives and to their kids, they want to be nurtured and nurture themselves. At the same time, their wives may, as Claudia has said, had gone back into the workforce and may start to fulfill some dreams that they have had. They become more focused, more assertive, and off they go. It appears at first glance that you're going in opposite directions. The husband says, "Hey, just slow down, I want to travel and just take it easy," and the wife says, "Hey no, this is my time."

Dr. James Dobson: "I've been waiting for this for a long time."

David Arp: Yeah, "I've been waiting for this, this is my time."

Dr. James Dobson: Here we go.

David Arp: "I want to go."

Claudia Arp: If they can just realize that what they're doing on this continuum they're moving closer together, because men are focusing a little more on home, women are being a little more aggressive and assertive, and it's grounds for a great marriage. If they can surmount these challenges that they face as they go through this empty nest passage, then they can reinvent their relationship and the second half can be the best half.

Dr. James Dobson: Did you guys struggle at this time? I mean, is this partly autobiographical? Are you trying to help others because you-

David Arp: To an extent. To an extent.

Claudia Arp: Our style has always been to make ourselves very vulnerable and let people know. At breakfast this morning with our friends they said, "Do you ever get angry at each other?" and we said, "Of course we do." But it's a little bit autobiographical because what we did, rather than move our focus from having a child-focused relationship to partner-focused, we went to ministry-focused. And rather than taking that time to readjust to each other and work through these challenges ourselves, we filled up our calendar with more speaking engagements, we signed more book contracts. And then that's where we got just so exhausted, we thought, "This isn't working." But because we were marriage educators, we knew we had to go out there and find out what would work, and that's when we came up with the eight challenges that comes next-

Dr. James Dobson: It's not enough just to be busy during that time.

Claudia Arp: No.

Dr. James Dobson: Everybody can find-

David Arp: You can fill up your time. Another scenario we see quite often, if they don't fill up the time, then they focus back on their adult kids, which the adult kids don't need. They don't want their parents to be that involved in their lives at this point. Or they focus on their grandchildren. There's nothing wrong with that, but we do everything except focus on each other and try to fill those empty spaces with other activities.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, you have now had a little time to think about this, how's it going now?

Claudia Arp: Great.

David Arp: This is the absolute best stage of life there is. If you can overcome the challenges and reinvent your relationship, it's wonderful.

Dr. James Dobson: Going back to what we were saying earlier about the woman who has given so much of herself to her children and now is not sure what's next, I'm reminded of a conversation I had with my dad. I don't think I have shared this one. When I was 13 years of age, we were in Alaska and we spent a good part of the summer up there and I got very bored. 13, I was raring to go, and we were in kind of a wilderness setting. I remember complaining about being bored and my father said to me, "Are you kidding?" He said, "Listen to me, the whole world is out there. Get out there and make it happen." I started taking hikes and doing all kinds of stuff, fishing and other things. He was right. I was just sitting there waiting for somebody to make it happen for me when the whole world was out there. You're saying, Claudia, to the women who are there, "The whole world is out there, go after it," right?

Claudia Arp: Right. And take the initiative in reinventing your marriage. Take the initiative in trying to revitalize, renew that spark. We believe that it takes one heart to begin to work in a marriage and that either the husband or wife might be that spark plug in the empty nest to begin that process of revitalizing a marriage.

David Arp: Can I interject this too?

Dr. James Dobson: Sure.

David Arp: This is one of the things we haven't talked about, and that is the importance of fun in marriage. We get married because we enjoy being together and doing things together and the kids come along and careers and we stop having fun. We talk a lot about dating in our ministry. One of our little phrases is, "Fun in marriage is serious business." In the second half, we need to reinvent that fun quotient to strengthen our friendship. And oftentimes couples, they come to us and they say, "Well, we just don't know what to do. Where do we start? We stare at each other and we don't have anything in common, we don't have any hobbies in common, where do we start?" The whole world's out there. If you do nothing else, just sit down and make a list of possible things you might want to do, hobbies, education, classes you can do together, short-term missions that you might want to go on together to reinvent your relationship and build that bond.

Dr. James Dobson: There's more available to you now than ever.

David Arp: Oh, absolutely. And now you have the time, you have the financial resources. Many couples have those financial resources that enable them to do that.

Claudia Arp: I think so many people assume that if you've been married 25 or 30 years that either you know all there is to know about marriage or you don't care. That's just not true because marriage is a journey, it's not a destination. And every day your marriage is going forwards or backwards, and we need to work on our marriage just as hard in the second half as the first half. But most books,

curriculum, and things that are out there are focused on marriage when you first get married, newlyweds or when you're parenting your children.

Dr. James Dobson: You talk in your book about forgiveness and disappointment. I thought that was really important. There are many couples after a couple of decades are carrying around this burden, this baggage with what's happened in the years before when one partner has really messed up, has really hurt you or said something that sticks with you and you can't forgive. Dave-

David Arp: Well, that's actually the first challenge. Challenge number one is letting go of past disappointments and forgiving each other and basically just cleaning the slate so you can start over. And if you can't do that, the rest of the challenges are moot or it doesn't matter what you do with the rest of them. That was one of the things that we did, was we made a list of ways that we had disappointed each other and asked each other for forgiveness for those different areas. But then we took the next step, and that is we made a list of things that we were looking forward to in the empty nest, things that we wanted to see accomplished in our relationship. And so we ended on a positive focus.

Dr. James Dobson: Now, you talk about taking your partner as a package deal.

David Arp: Yes.

Dr. James Dobson: I really like that-

David Arp: Oh, it's important.

Dr. James Dobson: ... because there are flaws there and there are things that were not done as well as they should have been, and some of them were hurtful.

Claudia Arp: Dave is always going to hum in his sleep.

Dr. James Dobson: Really? Now we're getting personal here. Okay.

David Arp: And Claudia's always going to leave tissues around the house.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah, it's all right.

Claudia Arp: But we came to that point of just saying, "Okay, those little irritating personality habits that will never change are going to become your wonderful, unique, lovable little idiosyncrasies I'm going to love." I think that that is one of the most wonderful things about marriage in the second half, a long-term marriage, is to be able to come to that point of just accepting each other.

Dr. James Dobson: Oh, yeah. Okay, I'm going to give you a personal one. Last night I came home tired and I went to sleep first. And so I was asleep when Shirley came to bed because she's doing paperwork or whatever she's doing. She came to bed, and I

promise you, it took her 10 minutes to get her pillow straight, to get the covers right. I'm trying to sleep and here she's thrashing around trying to...her neck off and hurts and she's trying to get herself comfortable. And then she dropped her pillow on the floor, this is last night, and she leans over to pick it up without getting out of bed and pulls all the cover off me. Here I've been asleep for over an hour.

And now, those are things that happen.

David Arp: Good.

Dr. James Dobson: Now, I have to decide at that moment how I'm going to react to that. You came in here and woke me up. You could have slipped in bed. You didn't have to wake me up, but you did. And I irritate her the same way. You have to come to the point that you accept the package deal, right?

David Arp: Absolutely.

Claudia Arp: Right.

David Arp: In our book, we suggest that couples make a list. Just write down a list of all those things you rattle off in your mind, those things that just irritate you about your... personality traits and those types of things, make a list. And then the things that you just can accept and just let go, let go and give it, as Claudia... maybe it'd be a gift that you give your mate. There may be some on that list, some things that you really do need to talk through and work through. And there may be one or two things that you need some help, some outside help. And we encourage couples, if there's something that you can't deal with within the couple, then for sure go-

Dr. James Dobson: That's a good time to deal with it.

David Arp: ... and get deal with some outside counseling, some good Christian counseling because a good short-term Christian counseling can help you get turned around and going in the right direction. And it's worth the effort if you're going to have another 30 years of marriage, however long the Lord lets us. That's our goal.

Claudia Arp: Another issue in second-half marriages is anger. We see this time and time again it comes up in a way that many couples don't experience in the first half, once the kids are gone and that buffer's gone. And so, one of the challenges of building a long-term marriage is learning how to process anger in a godly way and resolve honest conflict. So many times couples stuff it and get physically sick or they vent it and have just-

Dr. James Dobson: Tear it. Tear the marriage all to pieces.

Claudia Arp: ... a miserable relationship and it just accelerates, escalates. But we believe that couples at this stage can learn how to process it. We actually have an anger contract that we signed that helps us still with situations when we start to get angry.

Dr. James Dobson: Tell me more about that.

Claudia Arp: Well, we learned this from our mentors, Drs. David and Vera Mace, who were pioneers in the marriage enrichment movement back in the '60s and '70s.

Dr. James Dobson: Dealt a lot with ministers, as I recall.

Claudia Arp: Right, yes.

David Arp: Yes, they did. They worked a lot with the Southern Baptists.

Claudia Arp: They were just dear friends and mentors of ours. They taught us how to make an anger contract. This is in our book, *The Second Half of Marriage*. But basically it has three parts. We agree to tell each other when we're getting angry. So I would say, "Dave, I'm getting angry with you right now." The second part of the contract is to say, "I'm not going to vent that anger on you," so that it's safe to express it. And the third step is to ask for that person's help in dealing with whatever's causing this frustrating situation. So I could say, "Dave, I'm getting angry with you right now, but you know I'm not going to vent this anger on you. Would you just please help me? Can we talk about this?" And it short-circuits the anger so that we can step back and look at the situation and get on each other's team and attack the problem and not each other.

Dr. James Dobson: Other than a commitment to Jesus Christ, and by that, I mean a deep commitment to the things of the Spirit, the way a couple handles anger is the best indicator of whether or not they're going to make it together.

David Arp: Absolutely. Marital researchers have proved that over and over again.

Dr. James Dobson: Those that handle anger in such a way as to resolve it are going to survive. And those that handle it in such a way as to wound the other person and drive them away may stay together, but they're going to be pretty miserable.

David Arp: In Christian circles, we don't talk a lot about anger. We write about it, but you don't hear very many sermons on anger, you don't see many Bible studies that deal with anger. We're finding that in our marriage life seminars that when we get to this point, we get a lot of interaction with couples because they want to know how to take this God-given emotion, it's a God-given emotion, but how do you use it so that it builds your relationship rather than becomes destructive in a relationship.



Dr. James Dobson: And we vary tremendously at that point. You're right, I don't think the church has dealt with the Scripture on that issue as it should. Apostle Paul said, "In as much as it is within you, live at peace with all men." What he's saying is we vary in our ability to live at peace with all men. Some of them have been wounded ourselves when we were children, our needs were not met, and therefore it's hard for us to give and it's hard to forgive, and it's harder for some than for others. That's part of the package, isn't it, that we were talking about.

David Arp: It is.

Claudia Arp: It's part of the package. I believe that we really need to equip the church to help couples deal with these issues. We do know the skills, and they're based on biblical principles for building better relationships, for being able to process that anger, and to express our feelings, but do it a way that doesn't attack that other person or naturally makes you want to defend yourself. We believe that it's great to pray that God is going to heal marriages, but we need to get out there and help couples learn the skills that will ensure that that happens.

Dr. James Dobson: Somebody shared something with me about hurt the other day that I thought was really good. It had to do with golf. I'm no great golfer, but I'm just interested enough in it. And this is an admission, folks, because I've been saying for years I've never played the game, to have somebody use that as an illustration for me. He said, "When you hurt another person, you've really wounded them." It's like digging a hole, which they call a divot I guess, a chunk of grass out of the fairway. And so there it is lying there, the portion that you've dug out, and especially if you play like I do and you leave this big brown spot. They say that the quicker you can get that piece of grass back into the hole, the quicker the healing will occur and the more it will eventually not even be seen. But if you leave that divot lying out there for the sun to dry out, it becomes very difficult or impossible to completely heal it later. Isn't that good?

Claudia Arp: That's a great illustration.

David Arp: That's an excellent illustration. We were sitting here shaking our heads yes, yes, that's exactly. You want to take the negative communication, you want to short-circuit as quick as possible and move into a more positive step.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, as happens so often when we have so much to talk about, the time has gotten away from us and yet we're not through. I'd really like to continue with our discussion tomorrow. There are actually eight issues or problems in your book. We've kind of touched on several of them, but it is organized around those eight problems, isn't it?

David Arp: That's right, eight challenges, yes.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah. Okay, well, we will systematically move through them next time. I also want to talk about facing life alone, the possibility of the loss of a spouse.

There's just so much for us to talk about. The Lord is using you all across the country and really around the world. The name of the book, again, is *The Second Half of Marriage* by Arp and Arp. Some people think that's A-A-R-P.

David Arp: That's the adorable Aarps.

Dr. James Dobson: That's right. Thanks for being with us, and we'll pick up right here next time.

Claudia Arp: Thank you so much for having us.

David Arp: Thank you, Dr. Dobson.

Roger Marsh: Well, that was an insightful half hour of conversation here on Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh. Join us again next time for part two of Dr. James Dobson's discussion with Dave and Claudia Arp. By the way, if you'd like to learn more about Dave and Claudia Arp and their ministry, Marriage Alive International, you'll find links for that and more by visiting our broadcast page at [drjamesdobson.org/familytalk](http://drjamesdobson.org/familytalk). That's [drjamesdobson.org/familytalk](http://drjamesdobson.org/familytalk).

And while you're on our website, be sure you also take a look around at some of the other resources that we have there. You'll find all of our past Family Talk broadcasts as well as blog posts by Dr. Dobson, broadcast guests, and other Christian contributors. You can use the search bar to type in a topic of interest like empty nest or parenting teens. You'll find all that information and more when you go to [drjamesdobson.org/familytalk](http://drjamesdobson.org/familytalk).

Now, one of the issues that parents also deal with is just the simple fact that it's tougher to raise a son or daughter in the current culture, especially when it comes to parents with pre-teenage girls. Dr. James Dobson, of course, is the author of the classic book called *Bringing Up Girls*, and it's amazing how those biblical principles have stood the test of time. We've recently put together a brand new 10-day email series based on the classic writings that Dr. Dobson wrote about in the book *Bringing Up Girls* and we want to make it available to you absolutely free. Simply go to [drjamesdobson.org](http://drjamesdobson.org) and then click the link at the bottom of the broadcast page for the brand new 10-day email series based on *Bringing Up Girls*. Features the work of Dr. Dobson, of course, with additional material from Dr. Owen Strachan, the senior director of the Dobson Culture Center. Again, start receiving your 10-day email subscription series for "Bringing Up Girls" when you go to [drjamesdobson.org](http://drjamesdobson.org) and click the link at the bottom of the broadcast page.

Well, I'm Roger Marsh. Thanks for listening. Join us again next time right here for another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, the voice you trust for the family you love.

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