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Should Empty Nesters Refeather the Nest?

By Peggy Spear



Many empty nesters like to transform bedrooms into home offices. Photo Bigstock
shrinking the household: how will it affect their home?

The answer, I've found, is not that much.

Like many empty nesters, I had dreams of perhaps moving to a charming Berkeley bungalow, or a turnkey townhouse somewhere this side of the tunnel. Or finally moving my office out of the guest room or dusting off the weight set and making my son's room a home gym.

The problem is, my son might come home. My daughter did, after graduating from college, as do many young adults from Lamorinda. The fact is, the empty nest doesn't stay too empty these days.

"It was just a sensible move," says Orinda's Beth Sanguinetti, whose two daughters went to UC Berkeley. "When they graduated, neither had a job, so my husband and I said they should move home and save what money they could."

Today's economy is playing a huge role in the changing design of the "empty nest." It's very expensive to live in the Bay Area, especially for young kids just starting in the workforce. But it's not just a Bay Area phenomenon. According to a recent Pew Research Center Report, the country is now experiencing "the largest increase in the number of Americans living in multi-generational households in modern history." More than 10 percent of all households (11.9 million) include members of multiple generations, the majority of which were an adult child living with a parent. The number of children returning home has become so commonplace that they have earned the appellations "baby gloomers" and "boomerangs." One of every four young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 indicated that they had returned to live in their parents' house after being independent; one in five of those between the ages of 25 and 34 reported the same.

That impacts the way homeowners are looking at this time in their lives. Sanguinetti didn't change her daughter's rooms once they left for school, because they were close enough to come back often.

Like a giant slingshot, I am getting ready to launch my youngest child into the world. Actually, I'm just getting ready to send him off to college next month, but the fact remains: After raising three children, my husband and I will be "empty nesters."

The idea of an empty nest is scary: it sounds lonely, neglected and desolate, all legitimate feelings that experts I've talked to and read about say I'll feel after 25 years of focusing on children.

"Kids take up a lot of space in our lives," says Christine Roslund, a Lafayette-based therapist and life coach who specializes in empty nesters like I'll be. "You have to find something to fill that space."

The emotional aspects of facing an empty nest is a story for another time, but one of the first things empty nesters think about is the practical side of

"Don't get me wrong, while I missed seeing the small messes they made, like a swim towel dropped on the floor, I did enjoy having a less cluttered home," Sanguinetti says. "But I never changed anything up, like making a mom cave or an exercise room."

There's another reason parents shouldn't hurry to change-up an empty nest, according to Roslund. It can be harmful for your college-age child to experience so much transition at once.

"It is smart to keep the student's room 'as is' for a while, no matter how much you may want to change it," she says. "This is a tender time for a young person, and they need the feeling of a home base. There is so much change going on in their own lives that it is helpful for families to be stable and supportive, at least for a couple of years." She says that too much change can actually have a negative impact on how well they do academically when they are away at school.

Realtor Tara Rochlin of Village Associates in Orinda says that she doesn't see too many people change up their homes after a child moves out, unless they are launched for good, such as they are getting married.

She does see trends of making the child's room a guest room, or a home office, as she herself did when she became an empty nester. Her oldest went to UCLA and stayed in the Los Angeles area, while her youngest is going into his senior year at UC Berkeley.

"We kept my youngest son's room the same, but we did move my office to my older son's room," she says. She and her husband used to share an office, and this new set-up works best for both of them.

But that doesn't mean all empty nesters are keeping things as is. She still sees a fair number move to smaller townhouses, such as at the Moraga Country Club. That allows for less responsibility for yardwork and gives couples and individuals the opportunity to travel.

Rochlin also says she sees a good number of people move out of state, to less expensive areas such as Oregon.

"You have people wanting to simplify, if not downsize."

Of course, she also sees clients do what she calls "defensive downsizing," creating those exercise rooms and mom or dad caves that are disincentives to having their children move back home.

But the majority either simplify or stay put. "I sell a lot of homes in the area, especially single family homes, where people move in and say 'they're going to have to take me out of here in a box'. They move here for the schools and then they make a conscious decision to stay."

And that's a good idea, especially for empty nesters who may not really be empty nesters.

"When we move, we want it to be because we are consciously making a move toward something," Rochlin says, "and not because we are moving away from something."

So for now, I will dust off my dreams of a simple life as I am dusting out my son's room, and keep it the way it is. Besides, I've heard some rumblings from my other son, a recent San Diego State graduate living in Pacific Beach, that things are getting too expensive down there.

I may have someone else moving home soon.



Experts say it's sensible to keep a teen's room "as is." Photo Bigstock

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