

## I'm a single mom. Here's why I can't wait to be an empty-nester.

I wouldn't trade the past 20 years for anything. Now my kids are ready for a world of new experiences — and so am I.

By [Carrie Simonelli](#) Globe Staff, Updated May 14, 2026, 5:37 a.m.



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“A *trineggle* is the strongest shape,” my younger daughter first told me when she was little. It was more life lesson than math lesson: Here was this kid, too young to be able to pronounce triangle, but smart enough to equate each of us — me, her, and her sister — with one of its sides, inseparably bound and, well, *stronger* for it. The phrase became our mantra; though she’s 18 now and her sister is 20, it’s been the three of us, *always*, since I got divorced when they were small.

But with high school graduation and college on the horizon for her, and my older daughter moving into her own apartment three hours away, a seismic shift is coming.

It’s not just my girls who are ready to navigate a new reality: At the risk of forever being cast as a “bad mom,” I can’t wait for them to go.

After all this time, I want my life back.

Raising them has not been some selfless pursuit; if anything, it's been the opposite. I loved seeing them trying new things, and watching their worlds expand. I chose to spend my time being a youth cheer coach and a Girl Scout leader and a field trip chaperone, and they are choices I'd make again every time (except the trip when the bus broke down). The past 20 years have been a blur of dance lessons and karate classes, drives to practices, games, and competitions, washing team uniforms at midnight because why mention it's dirty before then and frantic T.J. Maxx trips because *of course you need a cowboy hat for tomorrow*. And while I cherish all of it, being a mother is all-consuming; maybe you have to cancel dinner with a friend — so many times that she just stops asking. Books you couldn't wait to read pile up on the shelf, while you juggle dinner and attempt homework help (Pre-calc? But I'm a *writer*) and an exhausting list of teenage baby sitters who call you at work to ask things like how to make canned tomato soup.

My daughters got older, and it got easier. Gone were the days of running to day care at 5:59:59, hoping the door wasn't already locked, with my kids and their teacher outside awaiting my arrival. Eventually, they could take the bus home from school, and later, drive themselves around in my Honda Accord (which became a trash can for half-eaten Chipotle). That stage brought its own challenges: No, the car wasn't broken down, I explained on FaceTime to my frantic new driver as she was being sworn at for blocking a Starbucks drive-through line — it just won't run without gas.

I am finally beginning to catch my breath, and strangely proud to have survived the chaos — but what now? While my whole identity has been inextricably linked to the triangle, have I been too busy to realize when exactly I stopped being my own person?

For a lot of moms in my situation, "What's missing is building a meaningful life beyond daily parenting," says Natalie Caine, founder of [lifeintransition.org](http://lifeintransition.org), based in Westport, Connecticut. Over nearly two decades, she has hosted workshops and support groups to help women navigate the "empty nest" phase of their lives.

This jarring transition can lead some mothers — and fathers — to experience "empty nest syndrome," a phenomenon "characterized by feelings of sadness, loss, or loneliness" after a last child leaves home, according to the Mayo Clinic. And if these feelings become overwhelming, it's a good idea to seek medical help, the clinic warns.

The key to getting through this phase, Caine says, is remembering that two opposites can happen simultaneously: "You carry both the sadness that your role is changing and you carry the joy of who you are becoming."

Looking for some joy, I turned to the fabulous humorist Erma Bombeck, who said that mothers at this stage are "upset because they've gone from supervisor of a child's life to

a spectator. It's like being the vice president of the United States." I guess I'm going to have to learn what a vice president does.

As to who I am becoming, Caine tells me to be patient: it's going to take time to find a new rhythm. Researcher after researcher cites a shift toward authenticity in women around age 50 — a desire to not simply muddle through, but to live with intention. A December study in the *Journal of Mid-Life Health* (humbling, isn't it?) highlights the potential for "personal growth, discovering new passions, and building deeper relationships with others."

*That's* what I want to accomplish.

To do so, I envision my post-September life in almost-Technicolor glow, filled with exciting hobbies — beyond bingeing BritBox, my current go-to — and tending to my brand-new-yet-shockingly abundant herb garden and *oh my God, can I join a book club?* Some days, I allow myself to get lost in the fantasy: I could pack it all up, sell my house, move to Spain, teach English. Or maybe it doesn't have to be that big. Maybe I can just learn how to successfully fold a burrito.

Caine, who estimates she has advised more than 5,000 women, points to the "deeper things" — a focus on spirituality and wellness. "The number one thing that I found in the thousands of parents is they focused on themselves and they became healthier," she says. "They worked out. They changed their diet."

My mind whirs as she speaks. *Yes, yes, yes, to all of that.* I may not be jumping into hot yoga any time soon, but I could start using that gym membership I've been paying for every month.

It all sounds pretty amazing, until Caine hits me with this: "There's guilt about that because that's not how we were raised: Once a mom, always a mom."

But now, she says, is not the time to let guilt take over.

Pursuing your own interests, and learning your likes and dislikes, makes you more empathetic to what your kids are going through, she says. After all, they'll make lots of changes in the next year — they'll try and maybe fail, and so will you, but you'll all learn, and that's healthy.

"You're at the stage of open doors now," Caine says. "Please don't call it 'empty nest.'"

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Carrie Simonelli can be reached at [carrie.simonelli@globe.com](mailto:carrie.simonelli@globe.com).