

When the children leave home

The empty nest syndrome is more common now as more people opt to live on their own

***Lin Wenjian,
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For many years, Mrs Jenny Teng woke up early, at around 7am, to make breakfast for her son and husband.

'Now, I prepare only one set,' she says, because her only child got married last April and is now living in his own flat.

Seeing son Edward, a mechanical engineer, tie the knot was 'the happiest time' of her life as well as a bittersweet experience for the 64-year-old housewife.

Mrs Teng, who lives with her husband, taxi driver Teng Kuan Siong, 71, in a three-room HDB flat in Hougang, says it 'feels weird not seeing my son in the house'.

At least Edward is living in Sengkang, not far from his parents. The same cannot be said for the increasing number of ageing parents in Singapore who are witnessing the emptying of their nests.

Last year's Census report states that of the 1.15 million resident households - which refers to households headed by a Singapore citizen or permanent resident - 51 per cent comprise three or fewer members, up from about 45 per cent in the last report released in 2000.

Experts say the greater number of empty nests is due to an ageing population and more people - both single and married - opting to live on their own.

The empty nest syndrome refers to parents' feelings of sadness and loss when their children move out of the family home.

But 'an empty nest does not mean no relationship and contact with one's children', says associate professor Tan Ern Ser from the National University of Singapore's department of sociology.

'I would argue that what matters is social distance, rather than physical distance. An estranged child living in the same household is socially much farther than a child with whom you have a relationship living in some distant place.'

Dr Kang Soon Hock, research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, agrees: 'I would not be overly concerned as long as the elderly couple is not socially isolated.'

Retired taxi driver David Lee, 70, is adapting well to living with only his wife in a four-room HDB flat in Hougang, after both their children moved out a few years ago.

'We are not sad because our children have their own lives to lead. They can't be with us all their lives. And their houses are very near, so we visit them all the time,' he says.

His wife, Maria, 65, adds: 'On weekdays, after we have breakfast, we will go to our children's homes to take care of our three grandchildren. We go to our daughter's home from Mondays to Wednesdays and to our son's place the other two days. On weekends, all of us go to church together and have dinner after that.'

Their daughter, Alva, 41, a business manager, moved out in 1999 and now lives in a HDB maisonette in Hougang. She had moved from another property in Choa Chu Kang in 2007 to be near her parents.

Her brother, Danial, 37, director of his own design firm, moved to a condominium near their parents' flat in 2006.

Although Mr and Mrs Lee have no complaints about their children moving out, he admits that initially 'we were not used to not seeing our children when we got up in the morning'.

It took a few months and a slight revision to their lifestyle before the new situation at home seemed less strange to them.

It helped that Mr Lee picked up cooking from a friend last year. Now he occasionally whips up tasty Peranakan dishes such as chicken rendang.

His son, Danial, says: 'Even though I don't live with them, I see them in the morning before I go to work and when I come back in the evening whenever they come to my place.'

Doctors warn that extreme cases of the empty nest syndrome could lead to anxiety or depression.

Raffles Hospital's Dr Lim Yun Chin, who specialises in psychology medicine, says parents should prepare themselves psychologically.

'Prevention is better than cure. Parents can anticipate the day when their children move out and plan their lives without their children,' he says.

Professor Kua Ee Heok, from the National University Hospital's department of psychological medicine, suggests that empty-nest parents should take part in social activities.

Both he and Dr Lim also urge children who have moved out to keep in regular contact with their parents through phone calls and visits.

This is what Mr Edward Teng does. In addition to having his parents visit him on weekends, he also calls home three or four times a week.

'About once a week, I drop by their place after work to have dinner with them,' he says.

Asked if he ever feels that it is a bother to do these things, he replies: 'My parents are old and I understand their feelings because I am their only child and I lived with them for 30 years.'

'It is normal for them to miss me and I miss them, too. So I do not find visiting or calling them troublesome,' he says.

On their part, Mr Teng's parents have also found ways to pass their time.

The couple go on regular 'movie dates'. Smiling, Mrs Teng reveals: 'We recently watched the local movies, It's A Great Great World and Homecoming.'

She also invites her friends over for mahjong sessions more often.

'I used to play only on weekends because my son sometimes brought his work home to do on week nights. But now, my friends come over about three or four times a week to play mahjong and to chat with my husband and me.'