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6 things every parent of a teen should do this summer. (Teaching laundry is just a start.)

Summer is an ideal time to talk about shifting roles and responsibilities to prepare kids for leaving the nest.

Making sure your teens know how to do laundry is just a start on getting them ready to leave the nest.(Image by Paul Michael Hughes T 0)

For many parents of teenagers, the impact of their children leaving home is something they've put off thinking about until the day arrives, and not a moment before.

As the mother of two grown sons, I can tell you that this approach to the looming empty nest doesn't work out as well as you might think, mostly because delaying the inevitable doesn't make it less inevitable -- it just makes it harder, later.

To avoid the sudden "Uh-oh, now what?" reality, try thinking about the time between then and now as a process. With a little planning and a healthy dose of conversation, you can simultaneously move on to a new stage of parenting while your children move on to adulthood.

Summer is an ideal time to talk about shifting roles and responsibilities (and perhaps offer an overdue laundry lesson) before the school-year demands kick back in.

Here are some tips to help transition with confidence.

1. Make the shift from active parenting to mentoring. Try cutting back on the decision-making and problem-solving for your teens, as well as tasks such as scheduling doctor or dental appointments and managing a budget or allowance. You can still help, but experts say it's best to let them take the lead. By having them develop these skills over time, as opposed to all at once when they leave home, you're teaching them how to be independent, successful adults.

2. Talk with your kids about the shift. Let them know mistakes are a normal part of the process and OK. Begin the conversation with: "This is all new for me as I know it is for you." Some other talking points: "Our roles are changing. We need one another differently, and we have different expectations about how we should be interacting during this shift to your adulthood. Let's be patient with one another and honest." Be sure to remind your children how proud you are of their decision-making. It will encourage them to keep making good decisions, and you to keep honing your new role in their lives.

3. Consider your own future. What are your personal and career interests? Are you doing work and participating in hobbies that you enjoy? Mine your childhood for inspiration and be open to change. If you're thinking you're too old to start something new, science has shown that's not true.

We not only learn from new experiences, we can retrain our brains. As we challenge ourselves and acquire new skills, the brain rewires and remodels itself. If you've been a stay-at-home mom and are considering a new career, think about skills you developed as a parent. Make a list. Do the same for interests. Try assessment tests. What kind of work can you do that blends your talent with your interests and values? Remember, you're the only person with your particular experience and background.

4. Take stock of your friendships. Research shows that friendships and social support improve our health, happiness and longevity. There's no magic number of friends that you should have, but be aware that during your transition, some of the friendships you once held so dear might not stick. Sometimes it's because your needs and goals have changed. Sometimes, friends might be going through an experience they don't feel they can share.

So what should you look for in a friend at this stage of life? Loyalty and trustworthiness, for starters -- someone who takes an interest in you and takes the initiative to plan things so they are not always one-sided. Ask yourself: Is there a particular personality I am attracted to? Who

makes me laugh? Inspires me?

5. Reignite your love connection. Try going on a date with your significant other and not talking about the kids for more than 15 minutes. This is harder than it sounds. Make time to discuss issues that are important to both of you, perhaps those you've been putting off, thinking you'd get back to them once the kids were out of the house.

Whatever you say, say it with kindness. That's the No. 1 habit of happy couples, according to the experts. If you need help opening the lines of communication, consider resources such as community and religious-based classes, or professional counselors and relationship coaches.

6. Purge. Are you holding on to every paper and project your child ever brought home from school or after-school activities? Sort through them and whittle down the piles. Make a memory box to store the best of the best. The goal is to avoid being in a home where your kids no longer live, but all their stuff does. This can make for some serious empty-nest blues even for the toughest and busiest among us. Try whittling the piles down together, as a family. Maybe a pizza dinner is the reward. Maybe it's just knowing it's done. Trust me, you won't lose the good memories. They really do live on in your heart.

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Plan your life

Melissa T. Shultz's first book, *From Mom to Me Again: How I Survived My First Empty-Nest Year and Reinvented the Rest of My Life*, is available July 5. She'll speak and sign books at Barnes and Noble, 2201 Preston Road, Plano, at 4 p.m. July 9.