

Primer for new empty nesters, *Scott Ostler, SF Chronicle*

If you will be dropping your kid off for his/her first year of college soon, especially if this is your last child, it can be an emotionally wrenching time. As a guy who just went through the process, I have a few do's and don'ts to help you out, Mom and Pop:

-- When you get back home, don't wander into his room the next morning. The tidy-up can wait. It took two decades to create this museum - what's the hurry? Don't put away those size 13 sneakers, or you might flash back to the time he was 2 and stumbled, and his mom said, "Pick up your feet, honey," and he bent over and grabbed the toes of his shoes and tried to lift his feet into the air.

-- Don't try to move his typewriter, the massive and ancient Royal with metal keys, the one he found in a junk store and begged you to buy. Hell no, you told him, what does a kid need with an antique? And even though what it cost you to repair it would have bought a nice laptop, his tappety-tapping was music you can't now replace.

-- Don't rummage through the words he pounded out on that typewriter, and on his laptop, and jotted in notebooks. You might come across the poem he wrote about a fiction writer's futility and despair in trying to bring his characters to life. Reading those things will just make it harder for you to go back to grinding out your cornball sports stuff.

-- Don't look at his dog, the little secondhand pup that was stuck in a gray cell at a shelter until a teenage kid doing volunteer work at the shelter decided this was the dog that would rescue him.

-- Don't make yourself breakfast alone that first morning back. Even though the sun is up, this little task might remind you of the hundreds of predawn breakfasts you or his mom whipped up to fuel him for swim practices. As he got older, people told you, "He can't make his own breakfast? You're spoiling him." But you figured if he can get up eagerly at 4 o'clock on a cold morning, to go jump into a cold pool and work to exhaustion, then listen to lectures from coaches Donnie and Ronnie about the importance of character, and a plate of eggs and bacon might spoil him, you'll take your chances.

-- When you go to the health club, don't stop and watch the kiddie swim team. It might zoom you back to when he was 5 and his mom took him to his tae kwon do class and was buying him a snack, and he looked outside and saw the swim team, and he tugged on Mom's blouse and pointed at the kids and said, "Mommy, I want to do *that*."

-- And then you'll just start thinking of how he and his mom became the world's greatest swim team, and how if she got paid by the ounce for the love she put into the adventure, she could hire [Bill Gates](#) to Simoniz her swim taxi.

-- Don't glance at the sign, "No glass on pool deck," because it will take you back to when you realized he inherited your sophisticated sense of humor, when you were at a meet and you saw that same sign, but some knucklehead had X'd out the "g" and both "l's," and you both laughed until you were sobbing.

-- Don't pick up the mail, because you might find a couple SASE's returned to your son from professional athletes, a reminder that even though your kid is something of a hero to some younger local athletes, he never dropped his kiddie hobby of mailing bubble-gum cards to famous players, requesting their autographs, and some of them actually respond to the handwritten notes from a kid who is now bigger than many of them.

-- Don't bother tidying up his swim junk right now. That might cause you to flash back to his first lesson ("Big arms and bubbles! Awesome!"), then to his first full lap, then to a coach admiring his "beautiful stroke," then to another coach phoning him to say "We'd like you to swim at Notre Dame."

-- Now is not the time to refile that pile of snapshots your son and wife went through looking for cute photos for graduation books and yearbooks. Might make you realize that if you toss the pile into the air, the second or two it would take for the last snapshot to flutter back to the bed would be the same as the time elapsed between when you first brought him home and when he decided that his mom and dad were ready to make it in the world on their own.