

When College Kids Come Home for the Holidays **Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.**

By now, many of the hundreds of thousands of kids who left for college in the summer or fall are back, or soon to return, to their bedrooms at Mom's and Dad's house. Whether yours is a first-time returning freshman, or a young adult who's been away for a few years, it can be a tricky transition back to the old homestead. At school, there are few, if any, dorm curfews, so kids come and go as they please in most cases. And, forget gender-specific dormitories—most are segregated by floors with open access to the opposite sex. In fact, many schools offer living situations where your son's next door neighbors may be gals just as easily as guys. Tough to accept as a parent? Well, for many of us, it is. The old college rules and restrictions in many cases are gone, and your adult child has been exposed to more experiences, opportunities and enticements than we were as college kids.

So, how best to have a comfortable holiday experience with this “new” young adult who's visiting for the next few weeks? Start by considering your goals for the time spent together. My guess is that, as parents, you would like to:

- See the kid as much as possible
- Have meals together
- Hear all about the grades, professors and studying that is occurring
- Get to know your child's new friends and significant others by either meeting them or hearing stories told
- Have fun, family style
- Engage in religious activities together

From the kid's point of view, though, the priorities may be different. Most returning from college for vacation want to:

- Visit with their buddies from high school
- Spend as much time outside the home engaging in activities they remember from earlier years
- If they are bringing home a college friend or girlfriend, boyfriend—expose them to their previous activities and chums
- Eat, get presents, and eat some more
- Have some family fun
- Engage in religious activities together

Not a whole lot of similarity between the two lists, huh? And, to make matters even more complicated, the rules, expectations and restrictions vary greatly from the parental point of view as compared to the child's desires. Often parents expect the child to still:

- Follow a curfew, but perhaps a bit later than during high school
- Not use alcohol or other substances in or outside of the home

- Fraternize “appropriately” with the opposite sex
- Check in at night by phone so that they won’t worry
- Keep the bedroom reasonably tidy (after all, it’s probably been spit-shined during the child’s absence)
- Wake up at a reasonable hour in the morning to engage in activities
- Perhaps get a part time job over the Holidays to bring in some extra cash

Okay, hold onto your seats because up next are the kid’s expectations and desires:

- No curfew, I can come and go as I please, just as I have been doing for the past 3 or 4 months
- Continue to use or not use substances (alcohol, marijuana) as occurred at school
- Have members of the opposite sex to the home, perhaps entertaining them alone in the bedroom with the door closed (some even expect to be allowed to have their friend sleep in the same bedroom)
- Not call home during the evening as to their activities and whereabouts
- SLEEP IN
- Skip the job search—after all, “this is my vacation!”

When reviewing the two sets of perspectives, it’s kind of scary; at least it was for me as a parent! What to do? Well, consider focusing upon the following:

- Compromising
- Respecting each others needs and desires
- Acting reasonably
- Discussing these issues early during the visit, if not before
- Keeping it in perspective—you want the visit to be pleasant for all

It may be difficult to come to terms with the fact that your child is now, technically, a young adult, with the rights and responsibilities that come with it. Granted, the kid most likely is still a “work in progress”, one who doesn’t always use the best judgment and common sense, but at some point, you do have to let go a bit. Some parents have an especially difficult time with that concept—depending upon their own need to be controlling, their child’s prior use of common sense and good judgment and whether there are younger siblings watching what you’re letting the older one get away with now that he or she is returning home from college.

My suggestion (having gone through this with two kids of my own and counseling thousands of families over 30 years on this very subject) is to:

- Know yourself and your tolerance level, and lower the bar a bit if you can—allowing the adult child to make many of the decisions independently

- Know your child's ability to make reasonable decisions—if her history has not been too spotty, let her call most of the shots.
- Accept the inevitable—it will be a miserable Holiday vacation if you are too restrictive
- Remember, in a few weeks the kid will be back at school—behaving in any way that they choose

Do though, set up some *absolutes*, depending upon your family's individual dynamics and code of values. Personally, my husband and I focus mainly on safety and moral issues. In our house *we* don't drink alcohol, nor use illegal substances. Our kids will never use these *in our home*. Period—end of subject. Not now, or even when they are married and come to visit with their own children—it's that important a value to my husband and I. *We expect respect*—both ways, from us to our kids and in return. If they are driving far during the evening, I do expect a phone call once they get there. What they do during their visit is their business, and I really don't care to know. I just want to make sure that they arrive safely. If they are planning to spend the night out, I'd like to know in advance (so that I'm not waken up by a phone call at 2 AM), but the latter would be preferable to an empty bed in the morning and my calling all of the local hospitals looking for my kid! Friends of the same gender can sleep on the trundle bed in their room if they desire, but kids of the opposite sex are welcome to the guest room. When they become engaged or married, the rule will change. It's Mom and Dad's house predominantly, especially now, and certain, few, important rules must be abided by. Other than that we can let most of the other stuff go—but the moral and safety issues are those that we still call the shots on.

I also expect my adult college kids to help out with some of the holiday activities and chores, mainly the funky traditions that we have observed over the years. We have dinners together most of the time and spend some of the early evenings together. Then the kids call their friends and hang out—either at our place or outside the home. But, we do expect to see them on a daily basis. Yes, they sleep in 'till noon, spend the latter part of the evenings with their buddies and even spend the night at others' homes. They often begrudgingly accompany us to some holiday gatherings where they are expected to stay for at least a minimum (preset) amount of time. And, they are expected to be respectful of others at these gatherings.

That's about it—no curfews, they are not dragged to dinner after dinner, gathering after gathering, or expected to sit home and watch TV with Dad and I. It's a compromise—the visits go smoothly, they get to do most of what they want, and we get to reestablish our relationship with the kids. Our questions about classes, grades, dating, future careers and other adult issues may not be answered, but at least we have fun and the kids are safe. And, they actually seem to enjoy the visits.

So folks, even though it may be difficult to do so, try to put aside many of the previous high school rules and regulations and view your adult children as just that—adults trying to make their own decisions (and pay the consequences, good and bad) and live their own lives. Be there for them if they request your guidance, stand firm on your few but

important house rules (especially if younger siblings are watching every movement and request), and, most of all—enjoy the Holidays! It will be several months until Spring Break, and just think—they'll be even more independent by then!