

## ***“Home for the Holidays: Keeping the Peace When College Kids Are at Home”***

By Susan Orenstein, Ph.D.

The bedroom door slammed yet again.

“I don’t get it,” said Denise. “She comes home from college to be with her family and then acts like she doesn’t want to have anything to do with us.”

George, her husband, agreed. “Sleeping ‘till all hours, talking on the phone, leaving her wet towels all over the floor – this is not a hotel. I thought college would have made her more mature, but her behavior is worse than when she was in high school.”

Upstairs, Sally had a different take on the situation. “Coming home was supposed to be a vacation,” she thought to herself. “It’s hard enough adjusting to college. I can’t even relax in my own house. They won’t even let me hang out with my old friends.”

As the month long vacation continued, the family interactions became predictable. Sally became more and more distant with her parents and when she did speak to them, she did so through sarcastic remarks or shoulder shrugs.

Sally’s family came to me for a consultation. How do we break this cycle?

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Home for the holidays is not always what it is cracked up to be. Maybe this is the reason late fall and early winter are peak times for families to seek counseling. Media images of loving families, with children returning for holiday gatherings, add further pressure to a stressful situation. Families with returning college students undergo a dramatic change of routine and readjustment during this season.

It helps to look at your expectations and needs as a parent, and the expectations and needs of your children in order to minimize conflicts which may occur during the holiday season.

### **Parents**

You are looking forward to seeing your son or daughter. You want to hear about their friends and interests, and as a proud parent, you would also like to hear about their successes and ambitions. While at your home, they should follow your rules. You expect them to resume their household chores and pull their own weight. Home for the holidays means time spent at home with family and visiting relatives. After all, you have not seen them in several months.

### **Students**

Students have eagerly anticipated winter break as a time for catching up on sleep, non-institutionalized eating, getting attention from Mom and Dad, and hanging out with their old friends. They have entered “the land of college,” a culture of its own, where people eat, sleep, dress, and speak differently. They have adjusted to the college routine of very little structure and virtually no supervision. Old rules don’t apply as they have already “graduated” to a new lifestyle. They may have chosen a “new look” for themselves and feel that this should not be questioned. Many returning students do not

want to discuss their recent college experience with you, their parents, assuming you would disapprove or misunderstand.

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It's not difficult to see that differing needs and expectations can lead to conflicts. Family events are often the center of misunderstandings between parents and their returning students. Your young adult-child may resent having to attend gatherings, finding them stifling and boring. Some students become uncomfortable and pressured when family members comment on their appearance or ask them about their future careers. Many parents worry that they will be judged harshly by the extended family if their college students do not come to these events, or if they do come with an altered appearance or attitude.

## **Solutions**

1. Start "the Negotiations" early.

Often the best method to resolve conflict is through prevention. Early during their semester break, or even before they return home for the holidays, tell your student that you'd like to discuss their transition home. Anticipate possible points of conflict and come to agreement before you and your teen develop resentment toward each other.

Foster the new adult-adult relationship for which your children/students now yearn. Invite them to bring up issues and listen to their perspectives, feelings, and needs. Ask directly for what you want. Hints, sarcasm, and martyr statements lead to misunderstandings, game playing and resentment. Outdated is the authoritative, parental attitude. This will inevitably lead to hostility and power struggle.

Here is a list of topics that would be helpful to discuss as a family:

- Attendance at Family Events
- Household Chores
- Use of Phone, Internet, Car
- Maintaining Hours that Work for the Whole Family (suggest avoiding the word curfew)
- Visiting Hours and House Rules for Friends and Boy/Girlfriends
- Money Management

## **2. Allow time for their return to home outside your home**

Like adolescents, young adults have a strong need to develop connections in addition to their family. Students often enjoy re-connecting with high school friends and sharing their first year stories. Encourage them to visit their old guidance counselor, teachers, or coach. Perhaps they'd like to invite a college student home for a weekend to introduce them to their old friends.

### 3. Be a resource for your returning college student

Telling your son or daughter how to spend their vacation is a recipe for disaster. Remember that they now consider themselves as independent adults. Suggestions and advice, however, can help shape their winter break into meaningful time spent. If they are participating in worthwhile ventures, they will be more likely to enjoy their time home, and family interactions are likely to be more positive.

- Have them consider some short-term goals for the vacation. Consider offering your son or daughter a brief membership to your gym, providing quality time together and a good physical outlet. Suggest cultural activities such as a day trip to the art museum, or ushering at a play to prevent your student from too much lounging around the house, often leading to boredom and irritability.
- Other ideas for helping your adult-child find meaning in the holidays is their contribution to others. They may feel needed and useful as they visit elderly relatives and bring photographs to help stimulate conversation or drive them to various errands or appointments. They might consider volunteer work for your church or synagogue, hospital or local charitable organizations to help those less fortunate.
- Encourage your adult-child to focus on the special meaning of the holidays. Invite them to help make holidays meaningful for the rest of the family by preparing meals or leading rituals. Confer a new role and status upon them by asking them to plan activities (e.g., producing a skit), games, and crafts for the younger family members during family events.
- The long winter break also provides your student with an opportunity for career exploration and planning. They can begin identifying job opportunities for the next summer or their post-college career. Encourage them to apply for winter internships available through their school or suggest that they shadow a neighbor or family friend at work to find out about various careers.

Take heart. Students cite their parents as the people they respect most. Know that you still play a pivotal role in your child's life by being a confidante, role model, and mentor. Remember that you and your child are undergoing a significant transition, as your parental powers fade and your child blossoms into a young adult. Enjoy some of your newfound freedom and independence, while taking pride in all of the milestones your family has reached so far.

Susan Orenstein, Ph.D. is a licensed psychologist in Cary, NC. Dr. Orenstein specializes in work with older teens and their families. She has developed College-Bound for Success workshops and resources to promote student success and family connections. To learn more about her services and newest resource, *The Ultimate Organizer for College Life*, click on [www.orensteinsolutions.com](http://www.orensteinsolutions.com) or contact her directly at (919) 654-7311.

