



Home for the Holidays:
Helping families prepare for a positive semester break

Returning home after the first few months away at college can be stressful for both parents and students as they navigate the many changes taking place within the family. In terms of the stages of family development, this period is like a giant growing pang for the entire family; boundaries are changing, expectations and roles are in flux. Parents no longer know exactly how to “parent” their adult child and likewise their children are not interested in being “parented” at all. Identifying the pitfalls and adjusting your expectations for when your son or daughter returns home can help make this transition go a little more smoothly.

Look to the future and not to the past during this time of transition. You are setting the stage for what will become your adult relationship with your son or daughter. The ways in which you navigate this stage will determine the ease with which you will relate in the future. For this reason, it is important to respect the many changes and accomplishments your child has experienced since they went away to school. At the same time, however, your child will probably not be as capable as you are at appreciating the impact that *their* being away has had on *you and the rest of your family* at home. Your increased capacity for empathy is due in part to the fact that, unlike your child, you probably *do* know what it’s like to be 18 or 19 years old and returning home. On the other hand, your child has no frame of reference for your experience as a middle-aged adult with grown children. Expecting your child to be sensitive and understanding of this is unrealistic and will set you up for hurt feelings and conflict.

It is a good idea to have a conversation when your son or daughter returns home about the appropriate expectations over the long break. Attempt to dialogue with them about what they would propose is reasonable and what you feel is reasonable in terms of curfew, chores and finances during their time at home. Be careful not to respond rashly to any of your son or daughter’s proposals. Give yourself a day to think them over and choose your battles wisely. Power struggles with young adult children are messy and everyone usually loses. Below is a list of possible expectations for you to discuss:

- Curfew and phone calls about their whereabouts
- Expectations about household chores and responsibilities within the family
- Access to the car may have changed since they left, shared use with the other family members

A little prevention can go a long way to helping you and your young adult son or daughter to respectfully navigate the uncharted territory of adults being back at home. And a respectful approach to those issues will set your future relationship on a new and healthy course.

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