

When College Students Come Home *(adapted from WKU Counseling and Testing Center)*

It may seem like yesterday you were helping your son or daughter move in a residence hall or apartment. Maybe you were worried and offered a prayer to the powers that be for your child to have a successful semester. Now the semester is coming to an end and a new challenge faces you; he or she is coming home.

For most families the return of a student for the holidays can be a fun time to catch up on what everyone has been doing and to admire how your son or daughter is becoming more independent and mature. For some families, however, the holidays can become difficult times with parents and children fighting about control and respect. Children may want the same independence they had at school and parents may want the same dependence the children had in high school. Each may see the others demand as unreasonable and disrespectful.

Hopefully college students and parents will keep in mind that holidays are about family and not who has the power. Each should be open to making changes in their plans for the holiday to maintain the connections of family. Here is a short list of recommendations for college students and their families:

Recommendations for college students:

If you want to be seen as an adult, act like one. Pitching a fit, demanding your freedom, and acting like the house is your private room are not adult behaviors.

Understand that your parents and siblings are human too and they will be hurt if you choose your friends over them. Spend time with family and friends, and think ahead about how you can do both.

You are returning to your house, but you are now an adult, and adults pick up the slack. Don't be ashamed to do more while you are at home. Your parents have cooked and cleaned for you most of your life. Now is a good time to pay it back. Keep your room tidy, offer to fix a meal, or do some yard work, laundry, etc. Show off how much you have grown while away.

Understand that from this point on your relationship with your parents should be based on mutual respect, not control. Your parents are most likely worried that they did not raise you well and they may have annoying ways of asking if they did a good job. Respect them and show them you turned out okay.

Most parents will seem a bit different from the last time you were home. They are growing too. They may be nervous or excited, and that is normal. But if your parents are really acting differently, don't be afraid to ask them about it. Job pressure, financial worries; even marriage problems can rise up while you are away. Your parents may be ashamed to tell you about their problems; they don't want to worry you or burden you at a time when you are having fun. Let them know you are older and more mature, and you

want to help. You don't have to solve their problems, just listen and let them know you are there for them.

Recommendations for parents:

If you want to be seen as an admirable parent, act like one. Greeting your son or daughter at the door with a list of rules, demands, or criticisms are not admirable behaviors.

Understand that while you are important, you have always been there for your sons and daughters, so it is natural for them to want to see friends first. Don't get in the way of visits with friends, but let your son or daughter know you want to spend time with them too. You might even plan a meal or activity that includes friends.

Don't think the old rules need to stay in place, and try to avoid the temptation to pamper or baby your sons and daughters. If you clean up after them they will come to expect it. True, they may need a day or two to unwind and catch up on sleep, but they are more mature now so let them show off. There is nothing wrong with a curfew, but talk about it first. If you did a good job raising them, then they will be able to handle bigger responsibilities. One suggestion is to skip the curfew time but ask that they let you know where they will be and have them call if they change their plans. Your son or daughter cannot grow up if you keep a tight leash.

Understand that from this point on your relationship with your children should be based on mutual respect, not control. Your children are most likely worried that you think they are not mature, and they may have annoying ways of showing you they can handle themselves. Respect them and show them they turned out okay.

All children will seem a bit different when they come home, but severe changes could indicate that something is wrong. Find a quiet time to talk with your child, tell him or her what you are seeing that is different and ask what has happened over the semester. Your son or daughter may think he or she should handle problems without your help. None of us get through life on our own. Even parents need to talk to their parents. Keep your questions short; don't ask for details just help your son or daughter get the words out.

For parents and college students:

Take some time before everyone gets together in the same room and think about what you want to do over the holidays. Don't try to plan it all at once, but take a nice, calm, and slow start at hearing what everyone wants to do. You might want to sit down with some snacks, or a meal, and make some lists of all the possibilities and options, take a break, finish the meal, and then come back to the list later on.

Be sure to plan some time when everyone is together and do plan some time to be apart. Mom and Dad need their husband and wife time, sons and daughters need their time with friends. Everyone could probably use some private time too.

We have talked a bit about coming home, so we should probably talk some about going back to school. Leaving for college can stir up strong emotions of excitement and sadness. Parents and kids alike may have trouble saying good-bye. It is hard for a son or daughter to be excited about being in college if Mom or Dad is sobbing at the door as the car pulls out of the drive. But kids do like to know they are missed. This is a good time for families to start giving hugs if they have not done so before. Your son or daughter needs to know you admire them no matter how old he or she is. All of us are more willing to take risks if we know we have a safety net. Parents have been and may continue to be the safety net for children in college, but guess what, college students can now begin to be safety nets for parents.

This is a time of great excitement and anxiety for parents and college students. Celebrate both emotions; they go well together. Have a happy holiday.

Parents, should you be concerned about the mental health of your son or daughter, please feel free to contact SMU Counseling and Psychiatric Services. Our staff members are happy to talk about your concerns and we can describe the services that are available for your children. We may be reached at 214-768-2277 or read about our services at www.smu.edu/counseling.