

Home for the Holidays

Holidays can be stressful, especially college students' first holidays back at home. This article looks at Thanksgiving as a turning point in the lives of first-year college students. It is written from the perspective of parents and includes nine helpful pointers for a happy family weekend.

Thanksgiving Marks Turning Point

By Janet Butler Haugaard and Lynn Willett

It's Thanksgiving weekend, and here they are, your children, home from college. This, however, is no ordinary Thanksgiving. It's the Thanksgiving of their freshman year and, although neither of you knows it yet, it's going to prove to be a milestone for both of you. What do you do when this exuberant son or daughter of yours arrives on your doorstep with a bizarre haircut (or none at all)?

In the three months or so since you last saw them, they've been telling their new friends about the home they came from, about the successes they enjoyed in high school. Uneasy in the new leveling environment of college, they've been pointing backward in order to present an identity (star quarterback, editor of the paper, counselor at a drug center).

By the time they leave home again at the end of Thanksgiving weekend, the pointing backward will have changed to a pointing forward. Now they will be almost eager to get back to the dorm and hear how their friends' weekends went, and in the next four weeks they will be anguishing their way through their first college final exams and term papers. In the few short weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas (as any professor or dean can tell you) they will finally settle into their new lives.

Parents don't usually realize, however, that although their children's perceptions of home will necessarily change during the weekend, the quality of this change is pretty much up to the parents. In her book *Necessary Losses*, Judith Viorst points to parents who are change-resisters, who defy the realities of time by hanging on to their power and to their non-negotiable ways of doing things.

Thanksgiving weekend presents an opportunity for the final stage of parenting: the blessing, the letting-go as grown children are cheered on with affection and respect toward full autonomy.

So now it's Wednesday evening or Thursday morning. Your child has arrived unexpectedly thin (or pudgy), sprouting facial zits from too much midnight junk food and lugging a duffel bag full of books for a term paper. What now? We offer nine pointers that, admittedly, emphasize verbal restraint. (Bite your tongue, Grit your teeth.)

1. Say positive things. Comment six times in five days, "You look wonderful!" or "It's wonderful to see you!" The corollary is that you make no remark on the weight gain, the miserable hair, the ragged nails.

2. Get Information gently. "Tell me about your friends" is a good opener to help your children see their new acquaintances somewhat objectively as they describe them.

3. Use your third ear. Listen, listen and listen some more. Behind the extra pounds and the overly loud voice lurks more self-doubt than you've experienced in a long time. Your son or daughter's unexpressed but overriding anxiety this first semester is, Can I make it? Will people like me? Should I even be in this hard school? You can help by listening and reassuring.

4. Don't ask. Drugs and sex are very much a part of your worries, but don't pry. Your children already know your wishes, and grilling them now may force them into lying. Restating your opinions may make you (and even them) feel better; but outright probing and threatening will be counterproductive.

5. Keep calm. Despite your valiant efforts, flare-ups may erupt during the long weekend. Your freshman has had some difficulty learning how to deal with emotions this semester (the creepy roommate, the "stupid" professor) and the sudden temper loss may be due to college stress or to outright irritation with you. Hear it out, calmly filing away for future reference any apparently irrelevant accusations ("And you were really horrible to Aunt Martha at high school graduation!"). These may be important keys to another issue, and a day or so later you can invite conversation on this concern.

6. Ignore unopened book bags. As Friday turns into Saturday and these supposed college students still have not touched the book bag, they continue to mention "I have this chem. Test next week." Bite your tongue. You want them to succeed academically, but they have to want it before anything can happen. And truthfully, it may not happen until second semester, if then.

7. Limit yourself to one (good-natured) comment on their appalling loss of table manners. One day these will return.

8. Respect their new status. On the matter of curfew: Three months ago, you sent your nearly grown child to a community where students are respected as full adults by faculty and staff alike. Your daughter has been deciding for herself when (or even if) to quit socializing and go to bed. Your son has had to discipline himself (without your help) to hit the books. She is old enough to vote, and he is old enough to enter the military and be killed. But you are entitled to demand consideration, which is the trait your freshman has been practicing in dormitory life. The issue, you can explain, is worry about their safety, just as you would worry for that of any guest under your roof. "Call us if you'll be later than 2 a.m." is a reasonable request, and when they call in at 1:59, ask that they call again at 4:30, "so we won't worry you were in an accident." Fair is fair.

9. Give. Hug them hard when they leave at the end of the weekend. And give them something to take away, like cookies. Or a little extra cash.

No other species on the planet Earth has the difficulty humans do in releasing their young. No other species tries to hang on for so long. Thanksgiving weekend provides a specific four-day period in which parents can, with forbearance, courtesy and good will, practice treating their own children as the adults they are becoming.