



Home for the Holidays

“David was our first to go away to college and it was a major adjustment for all of us. We all tried to figure out how much to communicate during the week before he left so he didn’t feel too abandoned, but we also did not want to feel too overbearing to him either. So much juggling. And just as we thought we had figured that out, it was time for him to come home for the first time since he left and he was coming home for the entire week of Thanksgiving break. Now more to juggle.”

This is a quite typical scenario that we hear all the time from UConn parents: “We’re trying to do the best we can to allow for independence. We know our child has gone off to UConn, but our child will always be just that ‘our child.’” Parents tell us it is difficult to allow all of the space necessary for a child to return home who is becoming a more independent adult at UConn. They add that as soon as their child comes back home, all the old rules, ways of behaving, and family roles go right back into place just like their child has never been away. However, these old rules cannot be applied in those old familiar ways without incurring some wrath of your semi-independent child. Tempers flare, patience runs low, distance is sought, and parents and children wonder just what the heck is going on. Yet, everyone initially was so looking forward to this reunion!

Things change. Your child left as your child and is returning as a more independent (and sometimes painfully) free thinking adult. As this natural process goes, it means you will also be making changes to facilitate this healthy process. Though that may be difficult, it is actually a very important transition. Psychologically speaking, the terms *separation and individuation* describe the normal process that children and parents go through when the independence things gets going. Our children separate from us as they become much more their own individual. It’s a good thing, even if it feels like you are “losing your baby.” You can do this! It happened when your child was two, entered kindergarten, rode the school bus for the first time, began high school, got their driver’s

license, and left for college. No one ever said that parenting was easy!! While it may feel like you are losing your baby, you are actually gaining an adult. This is an ongoing process! You are entering a new adventure in parenting that, while painful at times, is definitely rewarding overall.

So, here are some tips for making your holidays more enjoyable for all:

Understand that from this point on, your relationship with your children will work best if it is based on mutual respect rather than control. Remember the idea of a “curfew?” This could be a major point of unnecessary contention that could ruin the holiday visit. Perhaps absolutes can be replaced with a standard of consideration: It may be fairer to be informed where your child will be and it may be best that a return home time is renegotiated from the old standard.

Parents can expect some typical changes in their “emerging adults” when they come home. First off, while you may be paying all that money for their college, it doesn’t really entitle you to special privileges. Expect that you are likely to be faced with the ‘ole “Hi and Bye” pattern. That is, they are there long enough to drop laundry off, get some cash from you, grab a snack, and then take off to see friends. That may hardly seem fair to you, but it important to let your child set his/her schedule when returning home. After all, your child is doing this all day, everyday while at school. Don’t worry, you’ll have your time, too. Thanksgiving Day can primarily be a family day, at least until the evening!

Of course your children are happy to see you, but they are even more excited to see their friends. Don’t take it personally. This is very normal. There’s so much to catch up on since they left! These reunions tend to be very high on the priority list. If you want to see more than a glimpse of your son or daughter beyond the Thanksgiving dinner, you may

want to offer that they invite their friends to come to hang out at your house for an evening. Offering home-baked goodies can be a special enticement! Kids most always come back home with hearty appetites after putting up with residence hall food for a semester! Plus it will be fun for you to see their friends. After a quick “hi-bye” from you, (this pattern goes both ways) they will need their private space to visit with each other.

So hang in there! Hopefully, it will be fabulous to have your child home so they can share with what they have been doing at UConn. As we like to say in psychology “it’s a process.” Finding the new balance is tricky at first, but it does work out in the end. So, enjoy the holiday as best you can and remember some of the best spontaneous moments can happen over cold, left over turkey.

- **Barry A. Schreier, Ph.D. & JoLynn Powers, Psy.D. UConn Counseling and Mental Health Services (CMHS)** http://www.counseling.uconn.edu/parents_families.html

