

## **RETURNING HOME FROM COLLEGE: Tips for Parents and College Students**

December and May are the times when college students may be returning home to their families. This can be an exciting time for both the students and their families. They may be looking forward to enjoying the time away from school with no worries about homework or grades, and spending time with the people they missed while they were away (friends, family, significant others).

While it can be an exciting time, it can also be a challenging one for the whole family, particularly for the parents and the college students. This is especially the case after the first year that the students have been away. However, the challenges faced can be present regardless of the students' year in college, or if the students are returning home upon graduating from college.

For parents, your challenge is often one of struggling with the realization that your 'children' are growing up. In addition, this awareness that your children are making the transition into adulthood can feel both scary and painful. Scary, because as part of the transition to adulthood, you may be watching your sons or daughters make choices with which you do not agree. Learning to allow your children to become more independent involves learning to redefine your role as 'parent' (to what degree you feel you must protect them from harm (or bad choices), offering advice, setting rules) and allowing them to make mistakes and (hopefully) learn from those mistakes. This process can be a painful one in that as they mature and become more independent, you may feel as though they no longer need you. This is a normal feeling. However, it is not that they no longer need you, but that they may need you in a different way than they did when they were younger.

Here are some ideas that may be helpful to keep in mind as your sons/daughters return home from college:

- Recognize your own struggle with watching your children become more independent (awareness can help keep your behavior in check, such as when you may be tempted to "take over" for them and make decisions for them that they are capable of making).
- Recognize that your children are going through a difficult transition as well-they are also redefining their roles from 'child' to 'adult'.
- You and your children may wish to sit down and re-negotiate roles at home, household rules, and expectations of behaviors (chores, curfews, amount of time on the phone, letting you know where they are). For example, while in college, your children had to take care of their own laundry. Upon returning home, it can be easy to settle into old roles-either the parents want to continue to do their laundry as they may have done when the students lived at home, or the sons/daughters may expect that the parents will 'pick up where they left off' and continue to do this chore for them when they are perfectly capable of doing this themselves.
- Be a good listener.
- Support their efforts at becoming more independent.
- At times, you may choose to offer ideas/advice that may be helpful to them. You may do this, but remember that it is best to do this if your children ask for your input, but it may not be well-met if your advice was not sought out. When you do give advice, remember that your sons/daughters have the right to decide whether to listen to your advice, or try something their own way.
- When your children make a mistake, don't say, "I told you so". Instead, ask them if they would like your help and how you can be helpful.
- Be respectful of differences of opinion.
- Keep the lines of communication open.

For the college student, you may be concerned about what life will be like when you go home for the summer. You've most likely changed over the past year and become more independent. You've lived on your own (possibly for the first time), made new friends, and been in charge of how you spent your time (how often to study, spend time with the new friends you've made, defining your own sleep schedule). It

can be anxiety-provoking to return home, not knowing what will be expected of you and whether your parents will be ready to accept that you've changed. It can be very easy for you to fall back into the same role as the one you had before you left for school, and just as easy for your parents to expect and do the same.

Here are some things that may help if you find that you and your parents' expectations are at odds upon returning home:

- Try to remember that it may be difficult for your parents to watch you "grow up". They may be feeling unneeded, and may not know how (or be ready) to adjust their behaviors to how you've changed (i.e., they may still expect you to have the same curfew you had before you left, even though you didn't have a curfew while away at college).
- When talking with your parents about how you've changed and become more independent, be patient. Don't just expect that your parents should automatically treat you very differently. Learning to do that is a process for your parents and may take time.
- Although you've changed a great deal over the past year and may be a very different person, you will continue to grow and change (as we all do) and be a very different person a year from now. Remember that your parents may still have some very useful perspectives and advice, as they've been around longer and had even more time to grow and change as individuals.
- Respect differences of opinion-be able to agree to disagree.
- When differences do occur, stay calm, and recognize that differences are likely to occur. The more calm you are able to remain, the more likely you will be able to talk things over in a meaningful way with your parents.
- You and your parents may wish to sit down and re-negotiate roles at home, household rules, and expectations of behaviors (chores, curfews, amount of time on the phone, letting them know where you are). For example, while you were away at college, you were responsible for many things for yourself, such as having to take care of your own laundry, cooking for yourself, etc. Upon returning home, it can be easy to settle into old roles-either your parents want to continue to do things for you that they used to (like the laundry and/or cooking), or you may expect that your parents will 'pick up where they left off' and continue to do these things for you while they may be thinking that you should now do these chores. When re-negotiating roles, be patient and again, remain calm. Try to find a solution that works for both of you.
- Try to remember that while you may be frustrated with your parents' behavior at times, their intentions may be good. This can help in remaining calm in the face of disagreements.
- Finally, be a good listener.