

Home for the Summer Parenting Strategies – May 2010

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When our children come home for the summer, even if just for a portion of it, they are teetering between the child they were and the reasonably independent emerging adult that they have been while living away from home. Students feel like they are living largely without rules when they are at college. After all, they can stay out until the wee hours of the morning with no one really worrying about them and they can do their laundry at 11:00 at night. It is this absence of rules that students often equate with being independent, but for most families these patterns of independence rarely work well with the rhythms of day-to-day life outside of college. Most parents worry if they don't know where their kids are or at what time their children intend to come home -- and I don't know about you, but the last sound that I want lulling me to sleep is the clinking of loose change in the dryer.

When our children come home for any period of time it requires adjustments for everyone in the family system. The duration of the adjustments varies from individual-to-individual and while the student may re-enter the family system feeling like he or she is the only one experiencing the adjustment, you can't re-introduce one element without having a ripple effect across all the family members (don't forget the siblings). In talking with my clients I often compare a family experiencing this kind of transition to an unstable atom where the nucleus has excess internal energy. In an attempt to become stable the atom will lose neutrons and protons and often release that energy. When students re-enter you might experience a honeymoon stage, while your student catches up on sleep and enjoys the comforts of home, but then more often than not there will be conflict. In many ways this conflict is a discharge of excess energy. Parents are often trying to put rules back into

place and their student is pushing back with extra force to exert his or her sense of independence. What my clients most often lose sight of is that we have lots of parenting choices as we go through the re-entry and adjustment phases of our student's arrival back home. Let's take the situation of the laundry being done at 11:00PM and look at some of the parenting options we have. Many of the options can co-exist.

We can argue with our child about his or her doing the laundry at 11:00PM. (Negative energy)

We can be happy that our child is doing his or her own laundry. (Positive energy)

We can let our child do the laundry when he or she wants, if it is not bothersome. (Neutral energy)

We can be silently annoyed. (Negative energy)

We can acknowledge to our child how nice it is to see him or her taking this initiative. (Positive energy)

We can have a conversation with our child after we are already annoyed. (Probably more negative energy than positive)

We can have a conversation in anticipation of this being an issue and try to reach either a shared expectation or at a minimum an agreed-upon understanding. (Positive energy)

The excess energy around this situation and other common re-entry and adjustment issues, will inevitably find a way to discharge. In our parenting we can be informed about the most common issues that arise, anticipate areas that will be hot points, and think about the ripple effect we want to set into motion.

Some of the more common areas of conflict that families experience when their student re-enters the family system are expectations around:

Family obligations (visiting or doing things with other family members or family friends)

Meals together

Use of a vehicle

Scheduling and/or going to medical and dental appointments

Computer time (including on-line gaming & social networking)

Curfew (having one or not; agreeing on a time)

Friends visiting (including sleeping over, hours of the day, co-ed groups)

Chores

Getting up in the morning

Having a job or internship

Drinking, smoking, drug-use

You might be able to quickly rule out some of these areas of potential conflict, firmly knowing that they won't be charged with tension, but those that cause you to pause will benefit from some pre-thinking. When expectations are not agreed upon or understood, then conflict will eventually ensue. If you don't take time to address the issues early on in your student's transition back home, or ideally even in advance of your student's decision to come home, some of your expectations and rules will be met with force emerging from your student's sense of independence. Interestingly, we are usually happy to witness our student's developing independence, but the challenge within the family system is discovering in what ways it can co-exist with family life.

Some parents have great success in partnering with their student to develop clear, well-articulated, and shared expectations, while other parents establish expectations and attach consequences and privileges to facilitate the child's adherence. You will likely find that you do a combination of the two, setting some expectations and inviting your child to take the lead in shaping some as well. Maybe there will be consequences and privileges attached, maybe there won't, some of this

might be dependent on the positive ways in which your child has been developing.

While there are benefits to anticipating where conflict will likely arise, it is also important to recognize that we are not living with the same child that was in our house last year, last summer, or even at the holiday break.

Take time to learn how your child has changed, because positive changes in your child's development might mean that you will have fewer areas around which you have conflict. Also, if you find that you still need to have consequences assigned to some failed expectations, they might need to differ from the kinds of consequences that you established prior to your child being away this year. Similarly, your student's idea of a privilege may have changed as well, so you might need to revise the "currency" with which you reward your child.

The parenting challenges that exist when our children come home often present us with opportunities to visit areas of our parenting where we have the potential for greatest growth -- because our child's growth and development informs our parenting and our parenting contributes to our child's growth and development. One doesn't occur without impacting the other -- first we travel hand-in-hand with our child, then shoulder-to-shoulder.

"Human beings are the only creatures on earth that allow their children to come back home." ~ Bill Cosby