

Your college student is coming home for Thanksgiving. Prepare for re-entry.



If you're the parent of a college student who's returning home for Thanksgiving, chances are you have a greatest-hits list of activities — face time with relatives, watching favorite movies — you can't wait to do together over the break.

Your child probably has one, too, but it consists of seeing friends, sleeping till noon and borrowing the car. A lot.

There are ways to find a happy medium.

Montclair resident Jessica Wolf recalls "counting the minutes" five years ago when her son Noah, a college freshman, returned for his first Thanksgiving since leaving home.

"I had a big fantasy of how we were going to hang out in the living room and play board games," says Wolf. "Instead, he dropped off his dirty laundry, turned on his heels and drove off. I didn't see him for the rest of the weekend, except for maybe two hours during Thanksgiving dinner. I was devastated."

Such scenarios are common, but that doesn't make them less frustrating or upsetting, says [Dr. Andrew J. Lee, director of counseling and psychological services](#) at Monmouth University in West Long Branch.

"[College] is a time of exploration, when students feel greater independence," he says. "They're trying to figure out who they are more fully. Parents think, 'Aliens abducted my child! He's a different person!,' but figuring out who they are is normal at this age."

Meanwhile, Lee says, young people have their own concerns about going back to the home where they grew up. "They wonder if there will be a lot of conflicts, and how they can talk to their parents about their expectations," he says.

And the Thanksgiving get-together isn't just a low-key visit. "Holidays are stressful for everyone," says Dr. [Jennifer Tanner, a developmental psychologist](#) in Mountain Lakes.

Grown children want to feel comfortable and be served, as they were when they were younger. They also want to be respected for their new independence — at a time when there are obligations with family and friends, and the schedule is fuller than usual.

"That's a cauldron of people wanting to get their needs met," she says.

To keep conflicts from bubbling up so you can enjoy your child's all too brief time at home, experts offer this advice.

Talk about expectations, and agree on house rules.

At some point before the big reunion (ideally not during exams, when students are more stressed), parents should have an adult-to-adult conversation about reasonable expectations for the visit, says Dr. Lee.

"A lot of times, families get in trouble because they have assumptions, but no conversation," he says. "By maintaining those assumptions, feelings get hurt, and confusion and resentment build. The actual decisions you make are much less important than the process that gets you to those decisions, because it's a chance for both parent and child to show respect for each other, and a willingness to compromise."

Think about what's most important to you. Perhaps Thanksgiving dinner plus one other meal allows enough time for everyone to check in with extended family. Maybe your daughter won't mind eating in more often if she can have a friend along. "I always encouraged my daughter, Austen, to have friends over during Thanksgiving break, and always provided plenty of food," says Lynne Cusack of Washington Township. "Method to my madness: My husband Jim and I got a little extra time with her, and we enjoyed seeing the friends that used to be part of her days in the past, and catching up with them, too."

Discuss periods when you need the car to be available, how late guests can be over and how loud they can be, and whether the sight of a floor carpeted with dirty clothes is something you can abide for a few days.

And then there's the worry factor. Drinking and walking home on campus is one thing, but drinking and driving is both dangerous and illegal. "Your child may say, 'I don't have a curfew at school, and I'm still alive!,'" says [Cherry Hill psychologist Mitchell Liss, Psy.D.](#) "If he's 18, he's not a minor anymore, but it's fair to say, 'I need a call or text from you to let me know where you are at certain times.'"

Be patient as they test-drive different ideas and positions.

Your child loved burgers, and now he's come home a vegan. That's fine, but he lectures you for not being one, too. "Kids are exposed to much more diversity when they go away, and they're learning a lot," says [Dr. Richard Dauber, a psychologist and director of Morris Psychological Group in Parsippany](#). "They're asking themselves, 'How do my beliefs differ from my parents' beliefs?'"

Though comments such as "Everyone in our town is so conservative" or "It's so boring here" may seem hurtful, says Dauber, parents should try not to interpret them that way. "Kids will assert their differences first, and as time goes on, they'll come up with beliefs that are somewhere in between [theirs and yours]."

Dr. Lee agrees. "Even if they've grown up in a school that's multicultural, college is more intense, because they might be living with people who are different from them. That's what the first semester is: A time to explore multiple facets of themselves."

He says that learning to think independently is especially valuable at a time when contemporary parents can be over-involved in their kids' decision-making.

Prepare for the inevitable.

There are easy things you can do to make your time together less contentious. If you're sure she'll have a lot of laundry, do yours in advance. If you suspect that he'll be parking his car in the driveway late and blocking you when you want to leave in the morning (and he's asleep), set out a bowl where he can place the keys to his car. If dirty dishes spark arguments, consider using paper plates for a few days.

And wait for it to get better. Basking Ridge native Matthew Cortigiani, 23, recalls enjoying the family Thanksgiving get-together more with each passing year of college. "As I spent more and more time away from home, I felt more and more personal responsibility for who I was as a person," he says. "I became more thankful for the time I got to spend with family. Seeing as I do not see them very often, the experience is that much more valuable."

Tags Thanksgiving , College students home