

Inside People: Rewriting the rule book can be tricky

by Jane Clifford

Well, we shipped the youngest back to college last weekend and have been enjoying the silence. There, I said it. I like being an empty nester. I love my kids, but I love my kid-free life, too. Now.

Holiday breaks and summer vacations are wonderful reunions, when our three daughters and one son find their way home. But as my colleague Lisa found out, it throws us parents for a loop.

Her son, a college freshman, has left to start his second semester. She and I talked about that first visit home for our kids. Mine is a sophomore so I tried sharing what I learned from experience and from others.

The hardest part for us parents is remembering we're dealing with children who, well, aren't children anymore. When they last lived with us, they were high school students who had to abide by curfews and ask permission to bring friends over and all that. But for at least several months, they've set their own hours at school, welcomed people into their dorm rooms whenever they pleased.

Our problem is where to draw new lines. Their problem is not wanting us to draw any.

The experts tell me that both sides have to adjust. Our college students bristle against the old days and old ways. We bristle at them coming and going at all hours, taking the car (and bringing it home on empty), hogging the remote, hosting a horde of friends.

Lisa and I both talked about how we found ourselves as watchdogs again, sleeping lightly, listening for the door.

The experts say, "Go to bed and go to sleep." Just as we do when they're miles away at school. Curfews aren't a good idea anymore. Neither is "waiting up." Asking that they let us know if they're staying out unusually late or not coming home at all is appropriate.

It's also OK, the experts say, to tell our kids we need to know if they're inviting friends over, so we can decide if that works for us. They're on break, but we aren't.

Mutual respect is key. We have to acknowledge the change in their place in the family, and they have to

acknowledge that some things don't change - it's still our house, and we can set rules for how it's used.

It helps to put ourselves in their shoes, remember the newfound freedoms of freshman year, trust them, let them make some (hopefully, not too serious) mistakes. But it's equally important that we teach them that they can't have it both ways

That with independence comes responsibility. So, call if you're going to be late!

That it's common courtesy to treat those we live with graciously. So, Mr. and Ms. College Student, pick up your dirty dishes and put them in the sink.

That it won't always be easy as our kids pull away, as we learn to let go, but if we can keep things in perspective, it will work out.

Meantime, enjoy the peace, the quiet.

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