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THE HOUSEGUESTS ARE COMING

Keep Your Holiday Gatherings Simple and Stress-Free

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written by Lauren R. Dorgan, Monitor Staff

What to Bring Your Host

Donna Mark, co-owner, Caring Gifts makes a few suggestions.

For the guest on a tight budget: A "cute, unique" ornament can be purchased for under \$5. And you can't go wrong with candles. Be sure to wrap a little gift with the same care you'd give a more expensive gift. "Packaging them up makes a big difference," Mark said.

For the host or hostess who has everything: Mark recommends something edible. Top suggestions: A good jam with a fancy spread knife, an unusual mustard or a bottle of maple syrup.

For women: Consider something personalized.

For men: Think wine, cheese and crackers. Maybe a game of some kind. Or, for men with a certain sense of humor, maybe "Jock Wraps" - novelty wine-glass markers that look like jock straps.

Every Unhappy Family

Psychologist Mark Ciocca of Concord has this advice:

How to handle the in-laws, uncles or stepfamily you've sparred with: "My general approach to any of those people is to try to maintain a truce during the holidays. Whatever issues you may have during the rest of the year, try as much as you can to let them go during the holiday season." If the relationship is strong enough, you could call them up before a holiday to talk truce. If it's not, it may have to be one-sided. If your nemesis brings up a sore topic, Ciocca said, you can just say: "You know, I don't think this is a good time to bring this up."

Egg nog and martinis might not be the cure for a tense day: "I think that's often a bad idea because alcohol, as we know, can relax people and it's very hard to know where the line is between relaxing people and loosening up their emotions ... and then those boundaries that we talked about get crossed."

Other holiday landmines: Grief often comes out, because it's a time people are acutely aware of family members who have died. Sometimes, this leads to conflict, as family members have different ideas about what to do to honor the dead. Ciocca said he thinks the wishes of the person who's struggling most with grief should be followed.

For the single, loneliness can run high. Ciocca recommends getting out of the house: "Try to go out and perhaps volunteer, work at a soup kitchen or something like that, get involved, rather than sort of sit at home and feel sorry for yourself."

What about the old saying about the suicide rate peaking during holiday season? Completely untrue, Ciocca said. "The suicide rate actually peaks most years in April or May," Ciocca said.

Bringing the Kids

Thom Linehan, a University of New Hampshire extension educator in the family and consumer resources department. He co-teaches a course called "Parenting Under Difficult Circumstances."

Tell kids what to expect. Often, people forget that children haven't learned how to handle themselves in every situation, Linehan said. You can head off houseguest trouble by telling your kids what to expect. An example, Linehan said: "Well we're going to have the holidays at grandma's house and she has a collection of really cool fragile things. And it's okay to look at them and she doesn't want you to play with them, but she might not tell you that." Often, hosts don't say these kinds of things that may seem obvious to adults.. "They may think, well, it'd be impolite for me to stick my nose in to the parents."

Handling a holiday with an ex-spouse: "They can't split kids in two, so they have to figure out how to handle the holidays," Linehan said. Taking turns is a common approach. Another idea that's gaining ground: "The holidays are more than just a day," Linehan said. For example, one parent can spend Christmas Eve with the children, the other Christmas Day. A divorce is an opportunity to start a new tradition, he said. And remember: Look at it from a kid's point of view.

Let the adults do the planning. If you start talking about all kinds of different holiday scenarios with kids, they may get their hopes up for something that winds up falling through or not fitting in the schedule.

Getting Ready for Guests

Professional organizer Sue West of Amherst shares her suggestions.

In an ideal world, when do you start cleaning? West said she just read an article on www.realsimple.com that urges people to start two weeks before a holiday, spending 15 minutes a day. West said that sounds right to her - "provided your guest room hasn't become a junk room."

What if you don't start cleaning until the day guests arrive? "Put yourself in the mind of your guests and kind of follow along in the house where they would go," starting from the door, West said. You can't do it all, so focus on what you can do. "If there are rooms that they're not likely to go into, just close the door," West said. Some guests might understand if there are, say, Legos all over your living room floor. "If they're very close friends you might be able to get away with a little bit more than if it's your in-laws who are very clean people," West said.

Plan that menu far in advance. Make a grocery list at least two weeks ahead of time West said. That way, you can "spread out the cost and the shopping trips," she said.

Plan your season. West recommends getting a bright-colored binder or folder to keep all things holiday - gift lists, menus, greeting card lists, etc. In the season of packed calendars, West recommends making your R.S.V.P.'s with an eye toward what matters most to you for the holidays, be it travel, family, time or religious services. "Figure out what's really important and try to do that," she said.

Eat! Eat!

Andrew Gruel, the chef at Jack's in New London, shares a few food secrets.

Snacks for guests: "Personally, I always keep good cheese on hand, because that's something you can just break out with fruit," Gruel said.

For easy meals before the big feast: When he has houseguests, Gruel likes to roast several small chickens. Leftovers can be turned into salads, sandwiches, casseroles and pot pies. Or buy some pre-made pizza dough at the grocery store. Cooking pizza or calzones can be a guest activity, "fun to do with the family," Gruel said. Another idea: Jazz up your pasta by tossing in pre-bagged vegetable mix in for the last five minutes of cooking. Mix the pasta and veggies with a jarred sauce, and you've got a pasta primavera.

An good appetizer for the big day: Take a slice of brie, a slice of Granny Smith apple and wrap that in prosciutto. You can serve it with a dipping sauce, such as apple jelly mixed with mustard. Gruel said it's a huge hit for him. "For some reason, when I serve this with my family, they just think it's the most amazing thing in the world," Gruel said.

Passing is passé ... "The key is buffet," Gruel said. "It allows for everybody to pick and choose as they will." Plus, it allows for everyone to get up and moving. Gruel likes to put wine at the end of the buffet. That way, Gruel said, "you don't have to worry about being the host and making sure everyone's glass is full."