

# MOM... AND DAD

## Kim: Early Teens

The conclusion of daylight savings time puts my family in a funk. My son and I arise before dawn. Winter doldrums, here we come! My son spreads himself thin. He leaves for school before the sun has risen, and the sun has set by the time I pick him up from his daily after-school activities. High school is not for slackers. He knows that everything he does counts, manages to get it all in each day: school, sports, clubs, homework, studying, guitar, shower, sleep. Yes, even some dinner. My son doesn't complain much, but sometimes it gets the best of him. "I know", I commiserate with him. "We all did it. We've been there." It doesn't help.



My 10-year-old daughter returns home grumpy after having spent the vast majority of her daylight hours in a stuffy classroom, with minutes to spare before the sun sets. She will be learning Earth Science this year. I had that class in High School, for God's sake! She has her own set of tasks, but she is still at the age where she can just be a kid for a while, have a friend over for a play date and dinner. No wonder the sound of giggling 10-year-olds makes my son cringe!

So much more is expected of our children now. It's a different world. They need to learn quicker, faster, more, more, more! It's all about speed. The internet has replaced the library, texting has replaced conversation, e-mails and faxes may one day render the U.S. Post Office obsolete. (But really, how did our parents survive without being able to track us down on our cellphones?!)

We expect our children to get a solid night's sleep. The poor kids are so wired up thinking about their responsibilities, it's a wonder they are able to rest at all. I often see the blue light of my son's iPod emanating from beneath his blanket when I pass his room after midnight. "I see you glowing", I say. But I don't make him stop. We all deserve the opportunity to wind down.

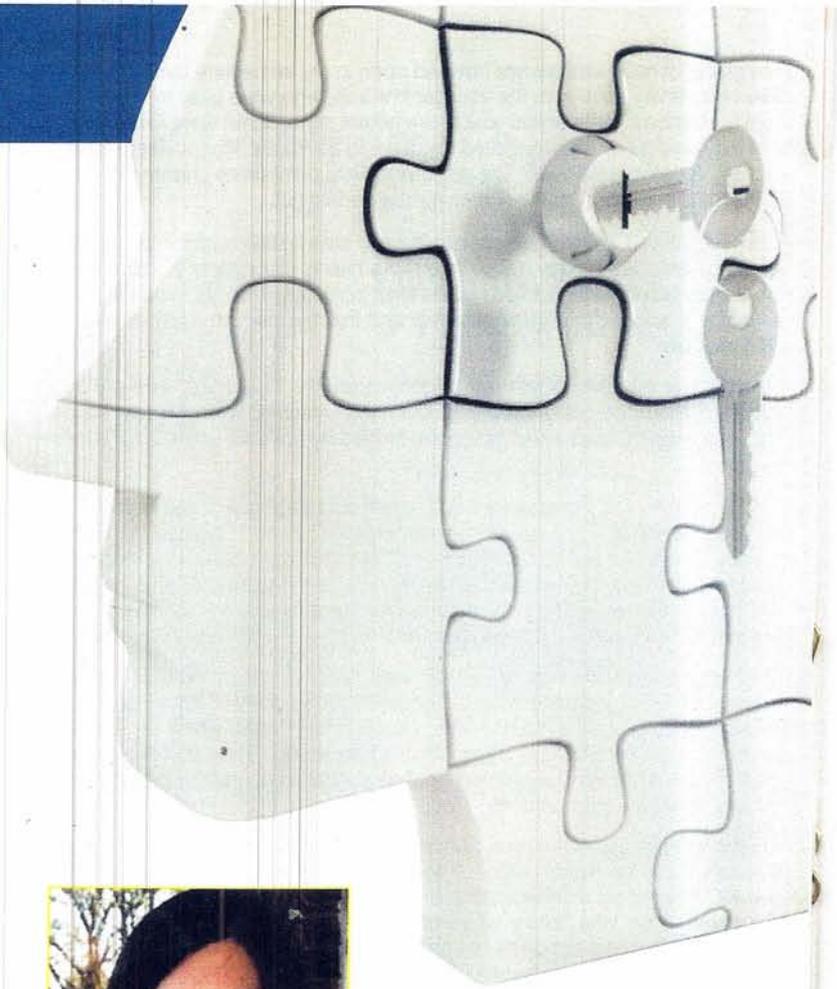
Winter (that's what I call any day that's below 50 degrees) is not a popular season in my home, but I try to make the best of it. As soon as the air gets crisp, I get this overwhelming desire to bake apple crumb pie and throw on a big, parsnip-loaded pot of chicken soup. Now, Martha Stewart I'm not. Anyone can tell you that. My kids (and husband) beg me to use a recipe book and make something different, please, something different! There's something about winter that makes me a little more experimental in the kitchen. The key word here- the downside, if you will, is "experiment"- so even when I make something amazing (and, much to everyone's amazement, it does happen), don't ever ask me to make it again. I can't memorize a recipe but my son has memorized the Periodic Table of the Elements. Go figure.

So we make the best of the onset of the winter doldrums, prepping for Thanksgiving, Chanukah and Christmas. Yes, Chanukah and Christmas. December is a very expensive month for my family. I was brought up Jewish, my husband Catholic. Neither of us are religious fanatics, but those ground-in traditions die hard. We are both stubborn as mules when it comes to holiday traditions. The meanings get lost, but, by God, we go about exploiting them, decorating as if we live in the Judeo-Christian North Pole, Menorahs and Trees and Presents, oh my! My kids always got the full-blown holiday experience, the traditional gift-a-night for the eight nights of Chanukah- and the obligatory Christmas equivalent. It's a gift-buying battle of the wills around here, and it is not a silent battle. We all want our holidays to be memorable, but it's gotten to be a bit ridiculous. I want to recall each holiday season with tears of joy, not stress. This year, everyone's gotta give in a little. Even the rich aren't so rich anymore.

"This year, it will be different", I say every year. It's not about the gifts, right? Yet, without fail, we find ourselves back in those retail stores, searching for the perfect present, watching in horror as the once-decent humans transform into hideous creatures, moaning on lines of mythical proportions, knowing that we will succumb. And that's ok, because we do it for our loved ones. Just don't forget the gift receipts!

Happy Holidays, people, whatever you celebrate!

By Kim Dinardo



## Risa: Older Teens

Teens and family holidays don't always mix, regardless of your religious preferences. Even family gatherings at home can be rough; as it is time many teens invariably prefer to spend with their friends. I know my teens enjoy seeing their relatives, but at protracted family gatherings there is an

occasional subtle eyeroll when the "how's school?" question is presented for the fourth time. I sometimes think that my teens can't understand the lasting power and value of the bonds with their extended family.

My teens have time with their friends and it far exceeds the time spent with family. Therefore, I make it a point to explain that it may not be their first choice of Sunday afternoon programming, but it is important and we all need to be present. I try to be flexible for family gatherings that might span an entire weekend, so long as my teens participate and are present for a reasonable amount of time. I am hopeful that, years from now, my teens will have a deeper understanding of the value of family and pass it on.

I do not know many teens who are so selfless that they reject the gift-giving aspects of the winter holidays. If you come across some of those teens, please let me know. Luckily, my teens understand that a gift is just that, "a gift," and not a "given." If we ask them what they want for an upcoming occasion, they understand that although we want to make them happy, we determine the appropriateness of the gift and how much we are willing to spend.

A successful parent of teens may have a teen who chooses to save up his hard-earned money, and use it to purchase a gift for a family member, instead of spending it on himself. Whether they hit the mark and get the perfect gift or buy a dud, it doesn't matter. Moms and Dads understand that it is truly "the thought that counts." I am thrilled when I see that my teens have gotten the message and have learned how to give, as well as to receive. As the holidays approached one year, my son was concerned that he was low on cash, so I told him to just write me something. He did. It was wonderful: it was more funny than sentimental, but it made me laugh and I loved it.

The giving of cash was always frowned upon in my immediate family. Still, it was never a big issue with the younger children, who were easy to shop for. Family members often asked which characters my children were fixated on, and they would buy them a related toy. It could be Barbie, Power Rangers, or Barney, the purple dinosaur. The gift-givers were sometimes challenged and sometimes enthralled by the search for the perfect gift.

The kids enjoyed the element of surprise and clandestine hunt for the secret cache of wrapped boxes. If they found the hiding place, they would shake the boxes desperately, trying to guess their contents. Their anticipation was palpable. It was a thrill for the gift-giver and the receiver, if the gift was a hit with the child.

Much of the fun and excitement is gone now. My 17 year-old and my 20 year-old will not be rifling through closets. Well-meaning relatives now hand my young adults money and gift cards, baffled by the daunting task of what to buy.

I still buy them gifts. Fortunately, my 20 year-old is a filmmaker and never tires of receiving DVDs. I just ask him which ones he has been waiting for, since his collection is so extensive. And, my 17 year-old loves certain clothes and pocketbooks, and her preferences are never a mystery. Appreciative as they are, it is not the same. I miss the enthusiastic squeals and radiant faces of the angelic children, rushing around the room to show off their new acquisitions.

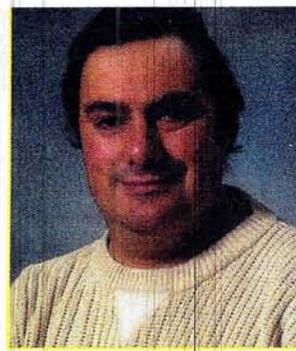
The biggest issue involving college students, home for the holidays, is "house rules." College students away at school are used to governing themselves. I personally grew up without a curfew, although my parents knew my friends well and trusted me and my sister. My children, though, have curfews during high school. They vary, depending on their school work and the reasonableness of their late night request.

Even after kids are college-age, some parents may still impose curfews when they are home for holiday break. I do not. The rule is: be home before I am awake. I still did not receive a round of applause for that concession, because the expectation was "sleep wherever you want," meaning at any friend's house, and that was not going to happen. Even if my college student were to tell me in advance where he would be, he would still need my agreement before he could sleep elsewhere. Granted, he can do whatever he wants when he is away at college, but out of consideration for his parents, who cannot yet abrogate total responsibility for their under 21 year-old son, he needs to follow some minimal rules of the house, while he is home.

In addition, I feel that if my son needs to be up for work the next day, it is his responsibility to set his own clock and wake up on time. If he chooses to stay out too late, that is his problem. Luckily, my son knows enough not to stay out too late on a night before work, and responsibly rouses himself on the days he needs to get up. I wanted my son to start to manage this issue on his own, after my many years of acting as his human alarm clock. After all, he needs to get up for class himself, when he is away at college.

All in all, I look forward to the holidays. I am thankful for what I have and for the time we have together as a family. In less than a year, my daughter will be away at college, just like my son. The holidays are a time when everyone returns home and I can catch up on my hugs.

By Risa C. Doherty



Since I am writing this in September, I am loath to admit I have been thinking about Christmas already. My mind hasn't been dominated by Christmas yet, after all there are still deadlines (like writing this) to make and no traces of snow on the ground yet. (Even living in Upstate NY we don't really expect snow until around Thanksgiving.) Our family's collective mind has been much more focused on the upcoming SATs and picking out colleges to visit. Interesting enough, though, the talk of college has made me think of Christmas because it has dawned on me: that this is the last

Christmas where our son will be completely at home with us. (Until he's out of college, can't find a job and moves back home with us to eat and do his laundry but that's a story for another time.) This has also made me reminisce about Christmases past.

My son's first three Christmases are pretty much mental blurs in my mind. Here is my disclaimer, what I write in the next few paragraphs may be mentally "adjusted" some due to age. Our first two Christmases were spent in Costa Rica, much to the joy of my wife's family, much to the complaint of mine. The third Christmas was in our home in California with our Costa Rican relatives visiting. Didn't matter where we were, as far as my son was concerned. It was a fun day for him, but he was more interested in playing with his cousins. The toys, presents and lights were simply nice distractions. As far as presents went, by the time he was three he would open them, but would just as likely play with the wrapping paper and box as he would the actual present. I always joked, "We should give him boxes and paper." He didn't have the whole, "this is a special day" concept down. After all, come on, when you are in preschool pretty much every day is new and special. No deadline or tests to worry about. Nothing. Your "job" is to learn by having fun.

The first Christmas I remember as being really special from our son's perspective was when he was in first grade. By now he was old enough to have to understand that this was the birthday of his lord (he went to a catholic school) and he was going to get a lot of presents and we would also give presents to people. Truthfully he cared most about the second thing, the getting presents. The look of wonder and joy in his eyes on Christmas, even as he looked at the sparkling lights on the tree and the presents under the tree, was that of pure joy mixed with wonder. His teacher had given the class "flying reindeer food" which we were to go out and sprinkle on the yard to feed Santa's crew. I remember fondly taking him by the hand and leading him outside as he, my wife and I spread the food, which glimmered in the light. (We used that reindeer food for the next five years and today we still have the bag.) Our son, of course, insisted we leave cookies and milk for Santa too.

The excitement on his face the next day has been ingrained in my memory. The thrill of seeing the cookies eaten and milk drunken (no small task since I am lactose intolerant.) The sheer glee he had opening and then playing with his presents. He loved Transformers and Legos; which we could help him put together. Whack a Mole was the big game (to me) that year and boy did we play it a lot! I would of course let him win... once in a while.

Now flashing forward some eleven years, I was a bit sad thinking that that little boy who looked at the Holiday with such wonder is gone. Then I realized, he's not really gone. Sure, he's not going to look in wonder at the tree or leave food for Santa. I certainly don't have to let him win at Whack a Mole any. But that doesn't mean the day won't be just as meaningful and memorable as that Christmas way back then. The core kid is still there just in a different, bigger more self-sufficient form.

His Christmas list is sure to have some video games on it. I also know he would really enjoy it if we gave him the super big Lego Death Star with thousands of pieces for Christmas. Only now he won't need any help at all putting it together. He will simply look at the directions and methodically build a mini-Death Star while his little cousin looks on in awe and contributes what he can. Once our son has spent however long it takes to put this contraption together he will gladly hand it of to his cousin to play with. Our son is in it for the joy of the challenge and the accomplishment.

So, I decided not to focus on the past this Christmas, but to think about the now. Our son has grown and matured, he is becoming a man. All those Christmases past have helped us form the person who we will be now sending out into the world. In a way, he is our gift to the world.

By John Zakour

