

A Guide to Managing Family Dynamics Over the Holidays

by Jill Hedgecock,

Author of Rhino in the Room,
www.jillhedgecock.com



Even the most loving, connected families often find the holidays stressful. The trick is to plan to minimize problems according to Dr. Ann Steiner,

a California Marriage and Family Therapist. Dr. Steiner is a noted national and international speaker, workshop leader, author, consultant to therapists, and a highly-respected, psychotherapist with a practice in Lafayette. Her book, "Help Your Group Thrive: A Workbook and Planning Guide" offers advice on how to deal with family dynamics that can take a celebration from a loving event to an ear-splitting yelling match or a snooze fest as one family member dominates the dinner conversation. Dr. Steiner explains that conflict in families and groups is normal and suggests that the Thanksgiving holiday offers a unique opportunity to show appreciation. She offers a proactive road map to steer your gathering from challenging conflicts to happy concordance.

A host/hostess can guide what he/she wants from their Thanksgiving gathering this year by including in holiday planning emails a statement like: "This year we want to come together to celebrate our connection, love and gratitude."

If family anticipate conflict between members, ask everyone in advance to avoid hot-button topics that create more distance. Activities like sharing reasons to be grateful can become an annual tradition that sets a positive tone to discussions.



"We all know we have differences that may at times make it hard to feel loving towards each other," says Steiner. "How you spend your time together can either bring people closer or make them feel less connected. I am a fan of finding ways to increase connection, even when big differences exist. Keeping connected despite differences is often challenging but is an important investment in your future together."

"In today's world, political climate is especially challenging," Steiner commented. Most people have strong opinions that are unlikely to change. Thanksgiving may not be a good time for a political debate.

Being proactive can help everyone have a more enjoyable holiday if a family has a history of escalating arguments. For example, hosts could ask that everyone agree to ground rules before the holiday. Focusing on good memories and

what family members have in common, planning activities that foster fun and laughter, such as playing a family game or looking through old photo albums, are other strategies. Also, a host can suggest that guests avoid heated debates for the sake of small children. If arguments tend to be fueled by alcohol, consider delaying serving wine until after a few hors d'oeuvres have been served, and distract from refills before there is a problem.

To avoid disagreements, agree to wrap up and shift the discussion to less controversial topics if it becomes too heated. When people are not able to truly listen to each other, Dr. Steiner recommends it is best to simply agree to disagree.

Dr. Steiner recommends discussions about what is most enjoyed about Thanksgiving. Maybe have grandparents talk about what they did at night before TV, cell phones, or the internet. Use this year's gathering as an opportunity to express gratitude, appreciation, and give thanks for what they all have, including each other.

To deal with a long-winded relative, have some topics that everyone can talk about. Possibly even use a timer. If the long-winded relative starts to take over, feel free to say something like, "I wonder what the children think about what you're saying" or pick out the theme or message and ask everyone at the table "Who else has had an experience like that?"

Remember, old hurts can easily be re-awakened when families get together. Assume that every family member wants to feel like a valued member of a team of related

people who despite their differences, love each other.

It helps to create a culture of respect and tolerance of differences. Creating agreements about managing disagreements in your family or group, and encouraging open conversations, if everyone agrees to, can dramatically increase feelings of comfort, emotional safety and connection.

Holidays can be opportunities to create positive lifetime memories. Think about how you want to make this year's gathering more comfortable and enjoyable. Reasonable expectations make that possible. Have fun!

To learn more about Dr. Steiner's work visit, www.DrSteiner.com. Her book, Help Your Group Thrive: A Workbook and Planning Guide, Routledge Books, is available on Amazon. (<https://amzn.to/2SiGKoX>).



Ruby Dooby Do to the Rescue

VEGAS

Each month a hard to place dog in foster care will be featured to give them extra exposure to find their forever home.



Vegas, a 3-year-old, 70-pound black lab. This good boy was found abandoned on the side of a Central Valley road with a severely injured front leg and other injuries. A local vet recommended he either go into rescue or be put down. Golden Gate Lab Rescue (GGLR) stepped in. Their vet found that Vegas had a fractured shoulder bone and a serious rotator cuff injury on his front left leg. His therapy includes cold laser treatment three times a week. His healing progress has been great, but his adopter will have to be absolutely committed to following the rest and rehabilitation protocol (no running or jumping) to ensure Vegas' rotator cuff fully recovers. Vegas is one pawsitively special dawg. He is located in Walnut Creek. His adoption fee is \$400. Check out this sweet boy's video at: <https://youtu.be/x4ssM1c46DQ>. If you are interested in Vegas, call, text, or email Rescue Rep Dave, 415-686-4248, david.c.ely@sbcglobal.net.

GGLR was established in 1986. They adopted out 280 dogs in 2017. They are a nonprofit/tax-exempt 501(c)(3) organization. The all-volunteer organization

has no offices or overhead, so all direct donations go directly to shelter fees and medical care (shots, microchipping, spay/neuter) for labs in need. Other options to help GGLR include purchasing lab-inspired shirts, bags, bottles, scarves, and magnets (<http://labrescue.org/store.html>).

Update: Daisy the Pug (featured in August, 2018) has been adopted.

[Ruby Dooby Do is Concord's Instagram celebrity Doberman with more than 63,000 followers. [Instagram.com/rubydooby_Do](https://www.instagram.com/rubydooby_Do). Column written by Jill Hedgecock, author of Rhino in the Room, Program Coordinator, Mount Diablo branch of the California Writers Club, www.jillhedgecock.com.]



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