

PEAS & QUEUES

THE MINEFIELD OF MODERN MANNERS



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1: AT HOME



Home is where the heart is.

Pliny the Elder (AD 23–79), Roman author

Dear Mary

I like the word ‘home’ partly because it has Nordic roots. The Danish equivalent is ‘*hjem*’ and it just means where we live. It’s a small word for something that means so much. For many of us the word ‘home’ represents the place where we grew up. If you’ve ever been away and been ‘homesick’ then you know what a powerful feeling you can have about your particular spot on earth. The fact that the quote above was written by a man in toga times shows yet again how little humans have really changed over the centuries. Of course, it’s worth bearing in mind that Pliny never married or had children so he may not have known what a noisy, crowded place a home can be.

Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* knew that there was ‘No place like home’ and ideally it’s the place where everyone should be at their most relaxed. This might lead you to think that it is the one location where you don’t need to worry about manners. In fact the opposite is true. The people with whom you share your living space are those with whom you live most intimately, whether it’s your family or your flat- or housemates. You need to respect each other and be thoughtful, or pretty soon everyone will be wishing

they were living alone. How and where you live changes as you grow but the basics apply throughout your life. Even if you do live alone you are unlikely to escape having neighbours and certain rules still help everyone rub along.

Some homes are more packed with people than others, but everyone is entitled to some privacy. What you'll find is if you allow your nearest and dearest a little private space then they are more likely to do the same for you. We all have moments when we would like to be alone so there are some simple ways forward. Ideally you start with having respect for...

THE FAMILY HOME

1. Each other

It's the old 'do as you would be done by' leitmotif of manners. Parents often go on about wishing their children had more respect, but it may be that they haven't considered what a two-way street that is. Respect is something you earn. Losing your temper and shouting at those you live with is rarely a good way forward. Very little is ever achieved. Be thoughtful and attentive to everyone in the home and you will find that they will be thoughtful and attentive back. That means parents listening to the kids as well as vice versa.

That doesn't mean the kids shouldn't consider...

2. Age and experience

Annoying, I know, but quite often people who have been around for a few years have learnt a thing or two. Advice from parents or grandparents might be worth listening to. If you are a younger person living at home then consider what is being provided for you at little or no cost to you.

If you want more control of how a home runs then ask for a meeting, or plan towards the day when you have your own home.

3. The private space

Everyone has a place where they keep private things. It might be

• **A whispered word about eavesdropping**

• This is a wonderful old word. It comes from the ‘eavesdrip’
• which was the bit of land around a house where rain dropped
• from the edge of the roof. Some Anglo-Saxon houses had a small
• hole called an ‘eavesdrop’ where homeowners could overhear
• the conversation of anyone standing close to their house.
• Standing around the eaves of someone’s place and trying to listen
• in was punishable by a fine. The modern equivalent is probably
• phone hacking. If you live in close quarters with others it is
• sometimes difficult to avoid eavesdropping on their business. The
• important thing, if you overhear something private in the family,
• is not to share it with the rest of the world. Don’t gossip about
• your own family. If you do, then it opens the possibility that they
• may tell the world something about you which you would have
• preferred to keep to yourself.

••••••••••
a small box with keepsakes, a money box, a diary or a desk. No matter how tempted you are to take a peek you need to hold back or you will soon find your own possessions being rummaged through by other people. Private space includes letters. The post is addressed to an individual for a reason – it’s personal. You should only read letters if they are addressed to you or you have been asked to. Postcards are fair game or they would be in an envelope.

4. The closed door

If someone has closed a door in the house and is on the other side they probably did it on purpose. Perhaps they need a moment in the bathroom, perhaps there is a bedroom activity taking place which is none of your business or, amazingly, they just may want a quiet moment to think. Knock and wait till you are asked to come in.

LIVING WITH FRIENDS

There comes a time in some young people's lives when they leave home in order to go and make a life away from the family. I say 'some' because these days not everyone departs, but it is not uncommon to go from living at home to having to share a place with people of your own age. Even those who leave school and go straight into employment are unlikely to be lucky enough to have their own place. Sadly, the world has changed and many grown-ups have had the bad manners to wreck the financial system for the next generation. I was able to put down a deposit on my first flat when I was twenty-three, but the current estimate is that by the end of the decade the average age of a first-time buyer will be forty.

So if you can't afford to live alone, or don't want to, you need to find ways to get along. The basics aren't so very different to living with your family, except that you're probably less of a unit when you share with your pals and may live more independently than you would at home. Nevertheless you are still living within the small circle of existence with each other and you need to find a way to make that work.

1. Eat your own food

It's actually called stealing if you take or use someone's things without asking. The lazy person who hasn't bothered to stock up on food deserves to be hungry. You don't have to label every item of food. Just agree on a shelf each and leave it at that.

If you share some foodstuffs such as milk and you have used the last of it, get some more.

One of the best ways to ensure harmony in the house is to prepare and eat at least an occasional meal with everyone, or at least have the occasional trip to the pub or go on an outing together.

2. Clean up after yourself

Don't let your plate of food go mouldy just because you can't be bothered to clean up. Unless your mother has tracked you

down and moved in you need to do your own washing-up. Do not expect that someone in your house will do it for you. Don't leave your unwashed things in the kitchen sink so no one else can clean their own.

Try to share the housework. No one wants to do it and the cleaning fairy rarely shows up. Hoover every so often and your housemates may do the same. Maybe make a rota to ensure fairness.

Do I need to say this? My daughter tells me she's had flatmates vomit after a drinking session and leave it. Really?

You need an exceptional reason not to clear away your own rubbish. In 2004 Jack Kirby was an art and design student in Hertfordshire who liked Budweiser beer. Over a three-year period he drank 5,000 cans of the lager and never got rid of the empties. The reason was perfectly reasonable. He used them to build a brilliant, life-size model of a 1965 Ford Mustang. Fortunately the car has no engine so there was no risk of anyone drinking and driving.

3. Consider your noise levels

Whatever you get up to in your own room it is important to recall that you are not living by yourself. So I'm going to suggest that you don't watch or react to porn very loudly even in your own room. This is probably not the book to suggest that if you are watching a lot of porn on your own you might want to think about that. If you have torn yourself away from watching 'Cycle Sluts' or whatever then I'm sorry there aren't more pictures but well done for making a start ...

In general your extracurricular bedroom activities are not a radio show for everyone else's enjoyment. Being forced to listen to other people's private pleasure is the right recipe for an awkward situation. Consider whether you would enjoy listening to them. Be especially conscious of this if one of your housemates has their parents staying for the night or you will have to take the walk of shame in the morning.

You may find it hilarious to come in early in the morning drunk and noisy but someone else may have an exam or deadline the next morning.

4. Don't let irritation get out of hand

Living with people who are not your family can be a huge adjustment. They may have got used to very different ways of conducting daily life. If something bothers you, or is done in a manner you don't care for, have a chat; do not start an argument by tiptoeing around the incident. There is nothing more tiresome, for example, than an escalating war conducted through Post-it notes on the fridge. Have a chat if something grinds your gears (isn't that a marvellous expression?). You might save a fair amount of trees in the process too.

5. Don't hold a party and fail to include or inform housemates or neighbours

It's just mean and anyway, if you're going to make a lot of noise you're better off having them on side.

6. Put some pants on

No one will appreciate your nudity in the house unless you look like Ryan Gosling or Kate Moss which is really unlikely.

7. Don't gossip about other housemates

This can lead to segregation and feelings being hurt. Consider – if someone is gossiping with you what are they saying behind your back?

8. Communal areas are for sharing

Don't stretch out on the sofa and then not move when others come in. Also, eating in the kitchen rather than your room is more social and you will get to know your housemates better.

9. Just a reminder about the pants

SHARING

Dealing with sharing arises no matter who you live with. Unless

you live in a palace you will probably have to share quite a lot of things – the ‘facilities’, the television, maybe a computer or even a bedroom. From as early as the 1590s we get a sense of the word sharing meaning ‘to divide one’s own and give part to others’. I don’t know what they shared in the 1590s. Madrigals, perhaps. However much or little you have, sharing is a nice habit for life. As Charlotte Brontë said, ‘Happiness quite unshared can scarcely be called happiness; it has no taste.’

Parts of the house

As Cleopatra no doubt said to Anthony, I’ll get to the bedroom later. In the meantime it’s worth having a think about the other divisions in the house.

The kitchen

It’s communal. You don’t need me to explain this in great detail. Learning to fill the dishwasher or wash up is not complicated. Take your turn.

Share appliances thoughtfully. If you need to wash your clothes and someone has left their laundry in the washing machine, put their items in a bag or the washing basket rather than placing them on the floor or the table. Don’t leave them having to wash their clothes again.

The living room

Again, not a private space. The clue is in the name. It’s where you all live. (Of course, some people call it the ‘lounge’, which sounds more relaxed, while others hint at the terraced nature of their property by saying the ‘front room’. There’s also ‘sitting room’, ‘drawing room’ and ‘parlour’. I think you can only use the latter when you have a deceased relative from the nineteenth century who needs laying out.) Whatever you call it, this is the room where you socialise with each other. Try and find some way to agree on how you might do that. Sharing the TV may mean occasionally having to watch Top Gear or even, heaven forbid, sport.

The bathroom

Clear the drain in the bathroom. It's probably disgusting but it's also highly likely to be something disgusting that came from you.

Consider all the parts of yourself you might leave behind to the distress or discomfort of others. Toenail clippings or hairs – long ones, short ones and the curly ones no one wants to see left behind.

The loo

Clean up after yourself. No one wants to see someone else's bowel movement leftovers. And be fair about the loo roll. If you use the last piece, get a fresh roll. If you find that you are the only person buying loo roll for the house (as it runs out quickly) leave a note or tell someone that you are running low. Give everyone fair warning (preferably before they sit down ...). Maybe leave an empty loo roll on the closed seat?

The garden

I once found a Victorian gardening book which contained the sentence 'No matter how small your garden do try to devote a couple of acres to wild flowers.' Sadly, such gardens are today on the rare side. Many gardens are small and, annoyingly, next to other people's gardens. This is worth bearing in mind if you decide to have a boisterous barbecue. Remember that your neighbours may not want to share the smoke from your fire or the beat of your music. It's also worth considering how much you want fast-growing conifers to establish your boundary if they also block someone else's light or view. Kindness. Sharing. And you never know when you might need a favour.

PREVENTING PROBLEMS

Household meeting

The worst families are those in which the members never really speak their minds to one another; they maintain an atmosphere of

unreality, and every one always lives in an atmosphere of suppressed ill-feeling. It is the same with nations ...

Introduction to second edition of *The English Constitution*
Walter Bagehot (1826–77)

Being part of a family or a shared household is a bit like being involved in running a tiny country. In our house I used to tell the kids they had been born into a dictatorship but luckily for them it was a benign one. Mary, you know that I am very interested in your opinions but that doesn't mean I will always agree to act on them. You're eight and I'm ... well, I'm not. With my family we used to check the temperature of all members of the household with a quick meeting. These are especially useful with teenagers who sometimes believe that no one listens to them and that everyone is hateful. Pre-empting a teenage rebellion is always better than finding yourself behind the barricades whistling hits from *Les Misérables*.

Having a regular look at how everyone is doing with the house rules helps those who live together to carry on thinking it's a good idea. (In a household of flatmates these get-togethers can be more fun if held in a pub.)

1. Set a specific time for the meeting

Maybe sit up to table. Make it fun. Have some nice snacks.

2. Focus on the meeting

Turn off phones, televisions etc.

3. Take turns being in charge

It's nice to take even the youngest member seriously. They may surprise you with the way they run the meeting.

4. Make sure everyone has a say

If you're the parent and don't agree with the kids then explain why. If you're in a house-share remember some people are shy even if the extroverts find that annoying.

· **Home sweet home**

· The great Australian opera singer Dame Nellie Melba was very
· fond of singing ‘Home, Sweet Home’ as an encore. In fact you
· can hear a recording of it on YouTube. During the First World
· War she toured the United States playing Desdemona in Verdi’s
· *Otello*. Her death scene was apparently magnificent and if the
· audience went wild enough, Dame Nellie used to get up, indicate
· for a piano to be wheeled to the stage whereupon she would
· sit down and accompany herself while singing ‘Home, Sweet
· Home’. Once the applause had died down, she would once more
· collapse onto her deathbed and let poor Otello bring the whole
· thing to an end.

·.....

5. Check on everyone

Go round the table and find out what everyone is up to. I had three kids and a busy career. It can be hard to remember everything.

6. Finish on a positive note

Personally I think this is a good time for more snacks.

Make time for each other

Everyone seems so busy these days that even meals must be purchased ready-made to be nuked in a microwave. Take the time to prepare a meal for each other and to eat it at the table. It’s the best way to keep in touch with each other and not suddenly be surprised at a turn in the life of someone who you ought to know well. My kids and I used to call it ‘The Trough and Candle’. We would make dinner, light the candles and sit down together trying to come up with a piece of information that one of us knew which the rest of the table didn’t. Some of it was most surprising.