

**Q & A: How to have a holiday season without the drama? Holiday tips for divorced parents**

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**Question:** I'm recently divorced, and this is the first holiday season that my kids, 7 and 9 year old boys, will have to deal with. Their father and I have a court-ordered visitation arrangement set, but we really haven't discussed it yet. And, there are the two sets of grandparents, both living in our town. Do you have any specific recommendations to help us to get through this first holiday season in one piece?

**Answer:** The holidays are an important time in most folks' lives—full of anticipation, excitement, and yes, stress! And, this can be even more so for divorced parents who have to juggle visitation schedules with their children's as well as their own wishes. Often the balance between exhilaration over anticipated celebrations and anxiety about how they will be handled can become a bit much no matter how cooperative the divorced parents are with each other. Throw in a few grandparents, aunts, uncles and perhaps step-parents and step-grandparents and the fun begins!

As a divorced parent here are some issues and tips to consider. Remember, the bottom line is to focus upon what's in the best interest of the kids, and for the adults to act in a mature and responsible manner.

**Keep it Civil:**

Judith Wallerstein, author of *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*, recalls remembrances from adult children of divorce. She notes "Christmas posed annual dilemmas. Along with the goodies came the question—whose turn is it to spend Christmas with? Some children of divorce recalled visiting grandparents alone without their parents, which gave many children a sense of belonging to an extended family, something youngsters in intact families took for granted...Family celebrations could be very happy. But they could also be marred by continuing tensions between parents, new lovers and ex-partners. Will one of the adults ruin the occasion by acting out? The children would hold their breath until the event was safely over."

It's important as an adult (whether you're the parent, grandparent, aunt or uncle) to behave like a *responsible* adult. If there is animosity between ex-spouses, give the kids a break for the holidays (if not forever) and be civil. If relations don't see eye-to-eye, fake it for the kids—you don't need to bring up the skeletons in the closet or to air the dirty laundry one more time. Remember, children are half Mom and half Dad, and when either is criticized the kids often take it personally. Some feel threatened themselves, while other children react by trying to protect the offended parent.

**Consider and Coordinate the Gift-Giving—Cooperation is Key:**

It's a good idea to discuss gift-giving between ex-spouses as well as grandparents. Try to keep it equal if possible. Remember, the holidays are about family, love and *some* presents—it shouldn't be a materialistic free-for-all. However, if it is deemed that the child *needs* an expensive gift, perhaps a computer for school, it may be wise for the parents or grandparents to split the cost. Or, if following the divorce, one parent has greater financial resources than the other it may be appropriate for that parent to foot the bill for the expensive gift while the other does his or her best by providing the less expensive items for the children.

Here are some general gift-giving guidelines suggested by Jennifer Lewis and William Sammons in their book, *Don't Divorce Your Children*:

- Children pay a cost that is too high to bear when gifts replace parental time and attention.
- If your children prefer your gifts to your time, then the relationship is in big trouble.
- Minutes mean more than dollars. “We don't have enough time together,” is said just as often by kids as by adults.
- If you leave the price tag on or you make a point of what the gift cost, it's not really a gift—it's a notice of debt or obligation.
- Gifts are fine, but a definite luxury when finances are tight for either parent. Don't put your child in a bind by having a gift cost a support payment or somehow seriously hurt the financial status of the other parent.
- If you spend money on the kids and expect an emotional payback proportional to the dollars invested, spare the children your disappointment if their reactions don't fulfill your expectations.
- If you have more than one child, the gifts need to be comparable in value to each child. **That does not mean they have to cost the same.** But if one child's “price tag” is *always* greater than the other's, the message of favoritism may be sent.
- Don't spoil the holidays by competing with the other parent or putting the other parent in a position of resenting your gift. Such acts ruin the celebrations for the children. If you are escalating into one-upmanship, call a truce before the losses get to be too great.

### **Be Accommodating with Your Schedules:**

Most divorced parents have received a court-ordered schedule of visitation which generally spells out the dates and hours of visitation, both throughout the year and at holiday time. Many families choose to follow the schedule rigidly if that works best for them. However, if the ex-spouses can co-parent cooperatively, they may be able to give their children the best gift of all—spending time with each parent. Consider allowing the other parent to see the kids on Christmas Eve for a few hours in order to exchange gifts, or to visit with the other grandparents at that time. Try to be flexible if it really doesn't harm your own holiday plans, and if the kids voice a desire to visit with both sides of the family.

Isolina Ricci, in *Mom's House, Dad's House*, provides the following pointers when it comes to holiday visitation plans:

- Consider your hopes for this holiday season—the times with the children, the times without the children. Have several versions, all acceptable to you.
- Present these alternatives to the other parent. (If you don't communicate well in person or on the telephone, use the mail or email.) Give the other parent time to think about your proposals and to respond.
- Try to plan your holiday times well ahead. **If you haven't made plans yet, do it now!**
- If you talk in person or by phone, follow up your understanding of the conversation with a brief and informal note of confirmation. When emotionally laden post-divorce holidays tangle with practical matters such as dates, plans, expenses and responsibilities, written confirmation is essential.
- Be very specific when making plans. Which parent will have the children, which day? For how long? Who will do the transporting?

Ricci adds that considering “Mom, Dad and the kids all under one roof just like old times for Christmas” often sends the wrong message to the kids. “Use this alternative with caution. It is only for the very brave, since parents report that pretending they are reunited again for the children often becomes too painful for the adults and inappropriate for children who harbor hopes for a reconciliation...and most children do....If your children are old enough to participate in the planning stages, by all means make them part of your discussions and give them a voice in the decision about holiday visitation. As in other matters, final responsibility for holiday decisions rests on the adults. Expecting children to make heavy decisions does not produce happy holidays.”

### **Follow the Rules:**

After you have the visitation plan set up, be sure to follow it. Although you may feel that an “unplanned visit” to your ex's home to surprise the kids, for instance, may be exciting—it may not be received well. Respect the rules and your ex's time alone with the children. Your time with the kids is your own, and their time with the ex is equally private.

If you are alone during part of the holidays and are tempted to just “drop by”, do what you can to distract yourself. Work out at the gym, email old friends or visit someone whom you've been in touch with but perhaps haven't seen for years. Keep busy—the kids will be back soon!

### **Respect the Other Parent's Religious Practices:**

If possible, try to take into account your ex's religious preference, especially if it is different than yours. Try to schedule the kids' holiday visit so that they can participate in

both yours and their other parent's religious events. A little planning goes a long way in this regard and often can be dealt with in your pre-holiday communications.

### **Begin Your Own Holiday Traditions:**

Although you and the children will desire to maintain many of the traditions and activities that were engaged in when the family was living together in one home, consider starting a new venture! Make it different, fun and memorable. How about baking cookies and other goodies and bringing them to your local fire or police station? Emergency workers appreciate the thought over the holidays and it will help to teach your children about compassion and volunteerism.

What about making edible ornaments for the Chanukah bush or Christmas tree? Cookie dough can be easily fashioned into almost any shape or design—get creative and get cooking! I know of one family who began a new holiday tradition in separate homes by making bird seed ornaments and hanging them on the trees in the front yard for the birds to feast upon. Not only was it an interesting project, but all three kids were able to chip to design, bake and hang the presents for the wildlife.

### **Blended Families Beware!**

As if being divorced at the holidays isn't tough enough, throw in a remarriage or two, or a few step- or half-siblings. The complexity of blended families needs to be addressed carefully—how to not buy or give more to your “own” kids or grandkids than the step-children or step-grandchildren. Like it or not, your children can be like little calculators—adding up how much each received, not only monetarily but in terms of the number of presents, elegance of wrapping and just about any other possible barometer of favoritism. Although Grandma or Grandpa may feel that they have the “right” to lavish or favor the blood-related grandkids, remind them of the hurt feelings that this can cause during the holidays and how you will pay for it long afterward! If they insist on giving unequally to the natural and step-grandkids, suggest contributions to college funds, buying stocks for the budding financial analyst in the family, or contributing in a way that is not so apparent to the children. In this manner grandparents can help to provide for the grandchildren, but in a fashion that is less obvious and doesn't tread upon other's feelings.

### **If Your Ex is Uncooperative:**

Sadly, too many ex-partners have a difficult time putting the children's needs ahead of their own emotions. If you don't communicate well with the other parent you may have to stick to the “letter of the law” in terms of following the custodial and visitation agreement rigidly. You can, however, go a long way in terms of making the holidays bright for your children by giving them lots of attention and affection, and not getting involved in derogatory statements about the other parent. Remember, kids are young for

such a short time—they don't need to be constantly reminded of your frustrations with your ex. Let them be kids.

**Happy Holidays!!**