

Helping Children of Divorce Cope During Holidays: Tips For Divorced Parents to Survive the Holiday

What Children of Divorce Experience During the Holidays

Children of separated families may find the holiday season to be more difficult than usual.

- Children may feel anxious from the excess chaos
- They may feel caught in the middle as parents negotiate who spends what time where
- They may feel resentful at having to leave friends and family to stay with a non-custodial parent
- Children may feel overwhelmed and exhausted as they are shuffled back and forth between houses
- They may feel as though they wish they could "split themselves in half" so that each parent will be satisfied
- They may feel sad as they reminisce on holidays when the family was still together
- Kids may miss one parent while spending time with the other
- They may feel guilty at leaving the other parent alone on a holiday

Tips for Divorced Parents to Survive the Holidays

There are many things that both parents can do to enjoy the holidays and ease the transition for their children.

- Teach the child to embrace his expanded family and the fact that he gets to celebrate the holidays twice
- Do not over-indulge the child with too many presents or candy; this is not healthy for anyone
- One parent should not compete with the other over who gets the child a "better gift" – if possible, strategize with the other parent to ensure even gift-giving
- Have a set schedule, preferably one that is set by family court. Typically, parents should alternate holidays each year. This takes the burden off the child having to decide where he would like to spend his time and also minimize arguing between parents
- Let the child in on the schedule in advance so that they know what to expect
- Put differences aside – do not argue with an ex-spouse in front of the child
- Teach the child what the holiday is truly about so that they can better appreciate the experience
- Plan fun outings and make new traditions such as caroling, ice skating, or catching a new movie in between the holidays to minimize the importance of a single big celebration
- Keep time together simple so that the child does not feel overburdened and overwhelmed
- Set a positive example so that the child is able to enjoy himself; parents should express their own frustrations to another adult, not to their child
- Recognize that most children want and need contact with both of their parents, especially during the holidays
- Allow the child to have phone or email contact with the other parent, especially on the holiday itself
- Allow the child to vent any frustrations
- Love and celebrate the child during these special times

What are some things divorced parents can do to make the holidays easier for their children?

1. COMMUNICATE. You need to be open about how they feel about splitting time. Obviously, you need to communicate your schedules, for instance, if you'll be out of town. And, once you've established those schedules, you'll need to stick to them: If your ex says dinner is going to be served at 2, don't drop the kids off at 5.

But, be flexible. Set a time. If dinner is at 2, you need to allow that another celebration may run over. So, if your ex arrives at 2:15, instead of 2, don't have a brawl. You need to have some give and take; everyone's celebration is important.

How involved in the communication process should the kids be? Discuss the holidays ahead of time with your kids, and see what they want to do. The holidays should not be about what you want, but rather, about what your kids want. Communicate with kids first before you approach your former spouse; see what they want.

2. PUT YOUR KIDS FIRST. Remember: Your kids should come first, so you and your ex need to put your differences aside. If there's any way at all you can spend some time together, do it, even if it's just an hour for a meal, or opening presents together. Try to find a balance for family. Remember: It's not about you, it's about your kids.

3. AGREE ON GIFT-GIVING METHODS. Try to buy them together, so they come from Mom *and* Dad. Or, if you need to shop separately, perhaps help your kids buy a gift for your ex.

What about the idea of trying to buy your child's affections - if one parent tries to outspend the other? If you have a civil enough relationship to talk about gift giving, you should be able to set some spending thresholds, or buy them together.

4. ESTABLISH NEW TRADITIONS. These can be as simple as what you have for breakfast Christmas morning, driving around town to look at the holiday lights, learning a new activity, volunteering in a soup kitchen or going to see "The Nutcracker." Sometimes, people try to recreate the past, and kids know it's just not the same. That's not to say you can't incorporate some of your old traditions, but it's good to have some new ones, too.

Don't try to recreate all of it. Unless you're fortunate enough to all be together, your kids will know it's not the same, and that there's obviously someone missing, which can be sad. The holidays can be a happy time for kids, and part of that comes from making new traditions. Don't dwell on what you're missing; create new traditions.

The best thing that both parents can do is to recognize and be aware of their child's emotions during this sensitive time. There is no time like the holidays for parents embroiled in separation disagreements to find a common ground – teaching their child to enjoy the magic of the season.

Above All: Put your differences aside, and remember that your kids come first!

A good resource is D.K. Simoneau's book "*We're Having a Tuesday*," a children's book that addresses the difficulties of being passed from one parent to another, on a Tuesday, a holiday — or any day.