



CELEBRATING THE HOLIDAYS AFTER A DIVORCE

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The first holiday season following a divorce can be difficult for children and their parents. During this time most adults don't feel as surefooted anyway, so negotiating the holiday season when everyone is supposed to be happy can leave one reeling. Television commercials of extended families gathered together with candles lit and music playing can trigger intense feelings of sadness, anger, loneliness, guilt and confusion. Knowing the holidays can be an especially emotional time; the following suggestions might help parents (and their kids) during this time of year.

Plan Early

Review with your children and their other parent how the holidays will be shared and celebrated. Children do best when they know what is happening and when it is happening. If parents are amicable, arranging a time when both parents can be with the children can be a wonderful way to demonstrate how you can all still be a family even though parents live in separate homes. Be flexible with children's schedules so they can be with friends and extended families from both sides of their family, even if that means deviating from the parental agreement. This is one of those times that adults may have to make adjustments so their children can enjoy holidays without emotional tug-a-war.

Maintain Old Traditions

Consider which traditions to maintain for continuity and for fun. Ask the children what they think and what is most important to them. Let them help choose what they want to keep year after year.

Start New Traditions Too

Engage your children in developing new traditions such as foods for the holiday meal, when to have the holiday meal, hanging white lights instead of colored lights, even when to open gifts. These new ways of doing things may feel awkward at first, but can help establish a new beginning.

Create a Blank Slate

Recognize things aren't the same anymore and give up expectations of duplicating the past. There is freedom (and sometimes relief) in not trying to make things the way they used to be and in having a "blank slate" to create your own way of celebrating the holidays.

Take Time for Yourself

Don't make your children responsible for cheering you up and don't make them feel guilty for visiting the other parent. Take private time to cry or vent your feelings to your friends and family. Treat yourself to something such as a massage, a dinner out with friends, the latest bestseller, etc. Remember that the holidays won't last forever, and next year will be easier.

Spend Extra Time Together

Do spend time with your children playing games, cooking, taking walks, or other special activities. Don't overindulge your children out of guilt or sadness or competition with the other parent. It's ok to tell your children that the holiday gifts may be a little smaller this year if that is the case. Consider giving your children IOUs for special time such as a day at the Tallahassee Museum of History, an all night showing of Harry Potter movies, pizza picnics in the living room, a marathon Monopoly game, stay up as late as you can nights, get out of a chore "free" card, etc. Children adore time spent playing with their parents, even more than the latest electronic gadget!

Help Your Community

Volunteer you and your children in some capacity over the holiday season. It is true that it does feel good to help others and it also helps in keeping your own situation in perspective.

Spend Extra Time with Friends and Family

Since this is a time that can be lonely, be proactive! Invite people over, go to a holiday parade, or art show. Bake goodies to take to others. Join the office party planning committee. Initiate a canned food or toy drive in your office or neighborhood.

Remind them that you love them.

Above all else, remember that as difficult as this time of year is for you, it can be more so for your child. Do everything you can to make sure they feel loved and secure and that even if this holiday is different, that your love and support remains constant.

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