

How Divorced Parents Can Help Their Children Through the Holidays

By Attorney Jeanne Hannah

Many children of divorce feel caught in the middle of their parent's battles during the holiday season. Holidays should be a time for kids to experience the love, joy and magic. Instead, many children are confused, frustrated, sad and angry.

The stress divorce causes children during the holidays: The holiday season may be more difficult than usual for children of divorced or separated families. The excess chaos may cause children to feel anxious. Children may feel caught in the middle if their parents fight about who spends what time where. They may feel resentful when they must leave friends and family to stay with a non-custodial parent.

Being shuttled back and forth between houses may cause children to feel overwhelmed and exhausted. Children may wish they could "split themselves in half" so they can satisfy each parent.

Memories of holidays when the family was still together may make children sad. While spending time with one parent, a child may miss the other. Children may feel guilty at leaving the other parent alone on a holiday.

How divorced parents can help children survive the holidays

There are many things that both parents can do to make the holidays more enjoyable for their children and themselves.

- Have a set schedule, preferably one that is negotiated by the parents and put in the parenting time order or, if the parents cannot agree, one that is set by family court. Usually, parents should alternate holidays each year. That way, the child is not burdened by having to decide where he would like to spend his time and also minimize arguing between parents.
- If both parents live close to each other, there's no reason why the child cannot enjoy the holiday with each parent. A good way to do that is to have

the exchange at noon on Christmas Day. The child has “wake up and see what Santa brought” with one parent, and has a later Christmas with the other. In even-numbered years Mom might have the child from Christmas Eve through the morning of Christmas Day, with Dad picking the child up at noon. In odd-numbered years, that schedule would reverse.

- Parents should tell the child what the schedule is in advance so that he knows what to expect. Children whose parents are divorcing feel a lack of control. They feel as though they have no voice in whether or not their family stays together. Giving your child some control over how he spends his holiday time with you lessens the stress of feeling out of control. This can be especially important for older children. The time scheduled for the child with the non-custodial parent might be a time when they would rather be hanging out with friends. Parents should consider giving their child the option of bringing a friend along. In the alternative, parents might plan activities with friends during their holiday parenting time.
- Parents should focus on keeping the time together simple to avoid overwhelming the child. Allowing your child to have an active role in planning any holiday activities will alleviate some of those out of control feelings your child may have.
- Parents should be open to the child’s sadness or frustration and allow the child to vent. Let your child know that he is safe expressing his feelings, especially any sad or negative feelings.
- Let your child know that you understand and that his feelings are normal.
- It’s important to remain emotionally available and willingness to listen. Acknowledge and validate your child’s feelings to relieve a great amount of the sadness your child may be feeling.
- Encourage the child to embrace his expanded and/or extended family and the fact that he gets to celebrate the holidays twice.
- Neither parent should over-indulge the child with too many presents or candy; this is not healthy for anyone.

- Parents should not compete with each other over who gets the child a "better gift." If parents are able to communicate, they should plan gift-giving together to ensure even-handedness.
- Even though holidays are stressful, parents should put aside their differences and should not argue with each other in front of the child.
- Parents can share holiday traditions and lore to teach the child what the holiday is truly about. This will help the child appreciate the experience. This may involve making new holiday traditions.
- Parents might plan fun outings during the holiday season. Some families center their traditions around gift-opening on Christmas Eve rather than Christmas Day. That makes sharing the holidays even easier.
- Parents should consider making 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.
- Parents should acknowledge that most children want and need contact with both of their parents. This is especially true during the holidays.
- Parents should allow the child to have phone or email contact with the other parent, especially on the holiday itself.
- Parents should focus on loving and celebrating the child during these special times.

Whatever parents do during the holidays, they should keep foremost in their minds that holidays are meant to be magical for children. They should be attuned to their child's emotions during this sensitive time. The holidays are a good time for parents embroiled in separation disagreements to find a common ground, to put aside their differences, and allow their child to enjoy the magic of the season. Showing your child compassion for the sadness he is experiencing and teaching him coping strategies will not only help him through this first, post divorce holiday season but also long after the holidays pass.