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Tips to Survive the Holidays for Divorced Parents



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Divorce is difficult for children and their parents at any time of the year, but it can be particularly challenging during the holidays. There are a number of issues that can arise, including:

- coordinating when and where the children are supposed to be,
- the gift giving tug-of-war, where the parents try to outdo each other by giving the most expensive present, or try to make life difficult for the other parent by giving particularly annoying gifts, and
- the termination or modification of established family holiday traditions.

The uncertainty and stress of being in a separated family or a divorced family can cause disagreements to quickly escalate into arguments, making this an overwhelming and stressful period for both parents and children. However, there are some things that you can do as a parent to make things easier during the holiday season.

Put your children first: Holidays when the parents aren't together can be difficult for children, especially right after the initial separation. There is often a mixture of negative emotions: sadness, anger and disappointment. Make sure you listen to your children's concerns and let them know that it is okay to have this mixture of emotions. Don't forget that the holidays are supposed to be a fun, festive time for your children, so consider how constant tension and repeated arguments will impact them and try to lessen their exposure.

Plan ahead: To avoid confusion, uncertainty and arguments, parents need to create a logistical plan ahead of time that specifies when and where the children will be. Don't make the mistake of waiting until the last minute to decide where the children will be and for how long the children will be with which parent. Make sure you confirm plans in writing, whether via email or otherwise so that both parents have a record of your agreements.

Having written plans helps avoid misunderstandings. Also, don't forget to keep your children updated on where they will go and when. It helps alleviate anxiety for children when they know that together their parents have come up with a plan for them during the holidays.

Avoid a gifting competition: Unfortunately, parents, particularly newly separated parents, can get into a gift giving war. It is not uncommon for one parent to give gifts that they know the children want without consulting the other parent or knowing that the other parent explicitly disagrees with the gift. This includes electronics like iPhones and iPads that one parent thinks is not age appropriate for the child. In other circumstances, parents try to compensate for any stress and anxiety children may be feeling as a result of the recent separation of the family by showering them with presents, well in excess of what they would have otherwise given if the family were intact. The best gift for your children is to avoid these competitions, because they not only cause strain between the parents, but also cause anxiety to the children. While the child might be initially thrilled to receive a pet, if they can't take that pet to the other parent's house then the gift ultimately causes them to feel stress, anxiety and disappointment. Sometimes, the gifts cause children to feel like a pawn in their parents' battle - this is especially true for electronics, where one parent uses the child and the electronic device to "spy" on the other parent's home. If it is at all possible, coordinate with the other parent so that the gifts are given from the parents jointly - despite the parents living in different households - this will give the children a sense of comfort that is a gift beyond a typical present.


Create new traditions: The holidays are usually a time for family traditions, but for divorced or recently separated parents, it might be time to start new ones. Holiday traditions can make the season special for children and establishing traditions where they focus on the needs of those less fortunate than themselves can ease the disappointment and anxiety that accompanies the breakup of their family. Also, creating new traditions gives the children something to look forward to in the years to come, and eases the loss of other established traditions.

Give yourself a gift: It is common for a divorced or newly separated parent to feel sad, alone and stressed during the holidays. Occasionally, because of the established visitation schedule, a parent might find themselves having more free time than in previous years or not having their child with them on the day of the holiday. While the children are learning

to adapt to the established structure, you should as well. Therefore, use this time to do something special or to create a new tradition for yourself. By taking action to alleviate stress, you will give yourself the time to recharge and be at your best during the time that you have your children for the holidays.

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