

## **Putting Children First: The Best Gift Divorced Parents Can Give Their Children This Holiday Season**

By Randi L. Rubin

Holidays can be stressful for everyone, but for children of divorced or separated parents, the holidays can be especially challenging. Despite this reality, divorced parents (as well as parents that are separated and considering divorce) can ease the tension, maintain their sanity and grace and create happy holiday memories for their children and themselves for years to come. The opportunity to create a positive out of what is often viewed as a negative depends on the divorced parents' ability to plan ahead and the level of conflict between them. Where parental or custodial conflict exists, courts — as opposed to the parents — often end up deciding how children will spend their holidays. However, there are many ways divorced or separated parents can handle custody during the holidays.

Some parents will alternate each holiday on an annual basis. In this scenario, one parent may have certain holidays in even numbered years and the other parent will have the same holidays in odd numbered years or vice versa. One drawback to alternating holidays annually is that one parent will have to face the disappointment of not being with his or her children every holiday each year. In order to try and soften the impact of this loss, divorced parents should plan ahead for the absence their children during the holidays by making alternate plans with their extended families or loved ones, planning to be away or scheduling events to soften the blow of not being with your children on these special occasions. All of these diversions may help maintain the non-custodial parent's emotional state and health during these times.

Other divorced or separated parents may choose to equally split the hours of the day on each holiday. This method allows both parents to have time with their children on each holiday annually. However, depending on the child or children, this can be stressful for them, as it may lead to a hectic schedule on what should be a care free and joy filled time. In addition, equally splitting the holidays on an annual basis means increasing the number and frequency of transitions for the kids as well as increasing the parents' interactions, which can often lead to disagreements or added stress to an already chaotic holiday season. If there is ongoing conflict or even a likelihood for conflict, equally splitting the holidays each year may not be the best option for children during holidays.

Before deciding to split the holidays equally on an annual basis or alternating which parent has custody of the children, divorced parents should consider if there is increased "chaos" for their children and select a schedule that will best suit their child or children's personality.

An alternative to equally splitting the holidays on an annual basis is for one parent to arrange a family dinner on the weekend immediately before or following the holiday. For example, if a dad's extended family lives out of town, Thanksgiving could be spent with mom, and dad could celebrate a Thanksgiving holiday meal the weekend following Thanksgiving. The key to successful holiday scheduling for divorced and separated parents is to plan in advance, to

maintain a consistent level of flexibility and cooperation while consistently considering the least disruptive schedule for their children.

As unconventional as it may sound, some divorced or separated parents may consider celebrating part of the holidays together with their children. In even rarer situations, parents may agree to celebrate the holidays with their children and their extended families — made up of both divorced parents and their former in-law families all together. People are often shocked when they hear that divorced families celebrate holidays together as they did when they were married and living together. This arrangement occurs in the minority of divorced families and usually only works in families where the divorced parents are cooperative and high functioning in co-parenting their children. To break bread and manage to sit at the dinner table with your former spouse and his or her extended family members truly requires that parents be “grown ups,” perhaps bite their tongues a bit and rise above the problems of their prior marriage. Divorced or separated parents that are able to celebrate holidays together as they did when they lived together as an intact family must be extremely “child-focused.” If there is the slightest chance for conflict between the parents or extended family members, opt for a different holiday custodial arrangement. There is nothing worse than spoiling a holiday or other celebratory time in a child’s life than participating in conflict, hostility and unnecessary drama. The last thing any parent wants to do is create a holiday memory filled with angst or argument as it will create a lasting impression for the children. For those parents that can agree to share the holidays, they should ensure that their children understand that mom and dad are just together to celebrate the holiday as a family, and it doesn’t mean that the parents are reconciling.

Finally, there are some divorced parents that are unable to be with their child or children at all during the holidays. In these situations, the absent parent may consider making an audio or video tape for the child or children to play during their absence or, with technology, the unavailable parent may schedule to speak by telephone or Skype. Some psychologists suggest that, with younger children, the absent parent make a video or audio reading of a holiday book or send a special video message to the child or children to fill the void of that parent’s absence.

The most important thing for divorced parents to remember is that the holidays are about their children, not them. Even if you are unable to be with your children during a holiday, encourage them to enjoy themselves with the other parent and their extended family. Try to embrace the spirit of the holiday season, let go of anger and be thankful for what you have versus what you have lost.

If there was an 11th hour holiday schedule negotiation last year and no ongoing holiday schedule for this year, set up a holiday schedule now. The best practice is to communicate with the other parent by email or text. Be sure to include specific details about when the holiday period begins and ends, where the custodial exchanges will take place, who is responsible for handling the exchange and be sure to pack any special clothing items the children may need to celebrate the holiday at issue. Ensuring that your children feel secure (as opposed to

disappointed) far exceeds the pain of a brief conversation with the other parent. Better yet, write an objective business-like email to iron out holidays plans as far in advance as possible. In addition, plan in advance with your extended family and don't be afraid to ask for their understanding and help if your custody holiday schedule does not match their expectations of the holidays. Uncertainty breeds anxiety. Divorced families can enjoy holidays in the same way that intact families do — perhaps even with a little less drama. Everyone will be happier knowing what to expect and avoiding conflict on the eve of the holidays will give both parents the ability to carry on traditions and create new ones, which will remain with their children for a lifetime. What better gift could a parent give?

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