

13 Ideas to Manage Holiday Step-Stress

The normal stress of the holidays is multiplied for stepfamilies.

By Ron L. Deal

“If you think your life is hectic during the holidays, you ought to try coordinating schedules, dinner plans, and Christmas gifts with the parents of three households—most of whom don’t care for each other very much.”

Stepmother Sheree was trying to explain her holiday stress to her own mother, who had never experienced stepfamily life. “Everything is just more complicated, Mom. There are so many people who influence our plans and lots of adults who don’t share the same priorities. It’s like hitting a moving target.”

The holidays are supposed to be a time when we slow down from the everyday hustle and bustle of life, spend some extra time with our children and extended family, enjoy some well-planned meals, do a little shopping, and see the latest Christmas movie. But for the average household, the holidays mean an endless to-do list that includes parties, travel to see extended family, decorating and putting up lights, attending school programs, and making purchases we can’t afford and won’t pay for until we get our tax refund next April.

Sheree knows that these normal stressors are even more challenging given the complexity of stepfamilies.

Here are some ideas that can help you manage step-stress during the holidays:

- 1. Plan, plan, plan.** Be proactive in discussing upcoming holiday events. A lot of stress results when families fail to plan and then play catch-up with all that needs to be done. Get an early start anticipating and coordinating your schedule with other households and family members. Set a spending budget and stick to it.
- 2. Maintain simple rituals of connection throughout the holidays.** A hectic schedule can make us forget the simple things. The small, simple behaviors that families repeat on a regular, and perhaps daily basis communicate love and keep us connected even when life’s typical schedule is disrupted. Hugs before leaving for school, a special note in a lunch box, and Friday night pizza with a family video are rituals that should be maintained if at all possible.
- 3. Parent 364.** It’s easy to get so caught up in the uniqueness of the holidays that we obsess in making them “perfect.” Don’t forget that what really matters most to children is what happens the other 364 days a year.
- 4. Give kids your permission to enjoy the other household and all their family members while away from you during the holidays.** When a mother says, “I’m thrilled that you will be

spending time with your dad and stepmom over Christmas; have lots of fun!" you are releasing them from guilt and worry over how you will fare during their departure.

5. Be aware of loyalty and loss. Realize that no matter how long it's been since a divorce or marriage, children struggle with feelings of loss. Being with mom means not being with dad. Being with dad means cutting time short with a favorite aunt on mom's side of the family. Or if a parent is deceased, family traditions don't feel the same without that person's presence.

Be sensitive to children's losses and realize that mixed reactions are common. For example, children may show excitement and sadness within just a short period of time. Don't punish them for sadness; listen, hug, and provide a little extra TLC to help them through.

6. Honor traditions. Maintaining old traditions can be more difficult given the shifting presence of family members. Keep the ones you can and look for ways to establish new traditions if new family members are present.

7. Do what you can and accept what you cannot change. By working on your co-parenting relationship with your ex throughout the year, your chances of respectful negotiation will improve during the holidays. But realize that you ultimately cannot control the other household and you may have to grin and bear it. When stuck in awkward or difficult situations, appeal to difficult family members with "for your son's sake, let's try to put our differences aside and resolve this matter." Hopefully this will be motivation enough. In the end, put what you cannot change at God's feet and go on.

8. Part-time biological parents should try to spend some exclusive time with their children. While everyone tries to get in a little more family time during the holidays, part-time parents especially should take advantage of opportunities to spend special one-on-one time with their children.

9. Be flexible and make sacrifices. You cannot make everyone happy all the time. Accepting this truth immediately takes away the pressure to give everyone what they want. Being flexible may mean modifying an old tradition to bring an "outsider" (i.e., stepfamily member) in. For example, perhaps you will need to open gifts a day before or after Christmas in order to ease between-home transitions for children.

One stepfather found himself disappointed year after year because his stepson had to be rushed off to his father's house in the middle of Christmas Day. He was never able to fully enjoy the day with his wife and stepson because everyone was watching the clock. Eventually he and his wife proposed a change to her ex, who, as it turned out, was also discouraged each Christmas and was open to changing the visitation agreement. They settled on an alternating arrangement that gave each home an undisturbed Christmas holiday while the other home had an undisturbed Thanksgiving holiday.

10. Let priorities save the day. You can't do it all so don't sweat the small stuff. Ask yourself what really matters and plan your schedule accordingly.

What should matter? Might we suggest that opportunities to spend time with your children and extended family, activities that reinforce spiritual truths, and honoring traditions should be at the top of the list.

11. Embrace your “expanded family.” You may not have chosen all the members of your multiple-household family, but choosing to welcome, embrace, and love them is a gift to everyone—especially yourself.

12. Discuss titles for family members. New stepfamilies especially should discuss with the children how they will address other people. Find terms (like “step-uncle”) that feel appropriate to children and will be respectful to adults.

13. Gift-giving tips:

- Stepparents and stepchildren should be encouraged to give cards and gifts to one another that feel appropriate to their relationship.
- Expect stepgrandparents to be equitable in giving gifts to grandchildren and stepgrandchildren.
- To avoid duplication, children can give a different wish list to each biological parent.
- Do not buy a gift together with the ex-spouse. It sets up false expectations for the children and is not healthy for the remarriage.
- Do not compete with your ex-spouse by trying to buy a "better" gift or spend more money.

Taking action

For pastors:

1. *When presenting holiday-related sermons/classes remember the added dynamics of multi-home families. Don't make the assumption that Thanksgiving and Christmas family activities are the same for everyone attending your congregation. For example, many single parents and stepcouples are without children on special days. Encourage your congregation to be an extended family to people in these situations.*

2. *During the stress-filled holidays, stepparents may feel “moved to the outside” and children may show their stress through increased oppositional attitudes. So remind stepfamily classes or small groups to offer extra support to one another.*

3. *Encourage stepfamilies to plan early for the holidays and maintain a flexible attitude.*