

Managing Divorce and Children During the Holidays

Divorced with children? Not over it? Plus, it's the holidays....

Robert Emery Ph.D. Posted Dec 16, 2008

Divorced with children? Well, then you'll never be completely divorced. You and your ex are connected through your children, and you will be throughout life. How? Coordinating schedules. Discipline. Their sicknesses. Figuring out how to deal with each other, or not, at school and extracurricular activities. How about high school and college graduations? Weddings? The birth of your grandchildren?

And even if you think you have completely shut your ex out of your mind, and your life, you are still connected through the children—even if measured only by the things they cannot discuss in your (or your ex's) presence.

Your ex is a big elephant in the room. Let's sneak a peek at that elephant.

First, let me be clear. I am not looking to deny anyone their anger. If you cannot be angry as a result of a divorce, when can you be? You should be furious if you discovered your ex had an affair. You should be outraged if you have been abused, one way or another. You should be irate if your marriage is now reduced to dollars and cents. You should be livid if you're losing your marriage, your role as a husband or wife, maybe your home, many of your friends and extended family, and you fear that you'll lose your children.

You should be angry, but I ask former partners who are also parents to do something emotionally unnatural. When a marriage ends (or any intimate relationship ends), the natural thing to feel and do is to be enraged. You scream, "I never want to see you again," and mean it.

That's all fine if you don't have children. If you do, I urge parting parents to be furious as wounded former partners, but nevertheless to do their - your - job, raising your children. You no longer have a relationship to resolve, but you do have a job to do.

And let me be clear about something else. I strongly recommend that most divorcing parents do not try to be friends. Great, if you can be friends. You've probably gotten there as a result of a lot of emotional effort, together and on your own. But most divorcing and divorced parents, I think, will do better at their job, parenting and co-parenting, if they treat each other like business partners: Your relationship is formal, structured, relatively uninvolved, governed by clear rules of behavior, polite but not overly friendly. You politely return a business call. You do not vent, or call late on Saturday night.

How can divorcing parents develop an effective, businesslike relationship, one that works for them and especially for their children? Well, that's a long, emotional, and complex story. I lay out a road map in my book for parents, *The Truth about Children and Divorce*, and I will visit key emotional and practical issues in this blog. (Here's one hint now: Search for deeper, more honest emotions that may lie behind your anger. When you stub your toe on a piece of furniture, you scream at the bureau but how you really feel is....?) (Here's a second hint: Your children's perspective on their mother and father is different from your perspective on yourself, your ex, what happened to your marriage.)

Getting there is coming later - or look at my book. Right now, I want to address something more specific and immediate: The holidays. Below you will find my 10 tips for the holidays (which you can also find on my website):

<http://emeryondivorce.com/>

I am interested in hearing stories from divorced or divorcing parents about how you made the holidays work for your children. I really am not looking to hear how your ex wrecked everything. Actually, what I would like to hear is how you created a memory for your children, even if your ex was a jerk, even if you didn't get to celebrate with your children on Christmas Day (or whatever your favorite religious or secular holiday), or even if you were feeling devastated but realized that the holiday ultimately was about your children, not you. I would love to hear, and for you to share, stories about how you used the New Year to make a fresh start, to look forward instead of backward.

That's my request. Here are the 10 tips:

1. Remember the holidays are not all about you.

Your children deserve their celebrations even if you feel cheated out of yours. Encourage them to have a blast with their other parent, even if you can't stand the prospect of being alone.

2. Get into the spirit of the season.

This is a time of giving, forgiving, and fresh starts. Turn Scrooge's emotional lessons about holidays past, present, and yet to come into New Year's resolutions about letting go of anger and treasuring all you have -- despite all you have lost.

3. Another lesson from Scrooge: Love means far more than money.

Your time, attention, and emotional presence are much more important to your children than lavish gifts. You may be short on money but you can be long on love.

4. The holidays are not a competition with your ex or for your children.

Teach your children the true meaning of the holidays, not the meaninglessness of materialism.

5. Communicate and coordinate with your children's other parent.

A brief email, telephone message, or conversation can insure that you don't duplicate presents or plan back-to-back feasts for stuffed and confused children. Ten minutes now can save days (or weeks) of fuming later. (If communicating with your ex takes more than 10 minutes, you probably are getting into issues better left for another time.)

6. Do the details.

Work out exactly where your children will be during what times, and when, where, and how exchanges will take place. Your children will feel more secure, and all of you will avoid frustration and disappointment.

7. Celebrate with your children's other parent.

Consider celebrating part of the holidays together with your children's other parent, especially if your separation is fairly recent. Some people are shocked when divorced families celebrate holidays or birthdays together. Go ahead and shock them!

8. Set up a plan for next year now.

If you went through the agony of 11th hour negotiations this year, set up a plan for next year now (or after New Year's). Everyone will be happier knowing what is coming, and avoiding conflict on the eve of the holidays.

9. Plan in advance with your extended family.

Work things out in advance with your own extended family too, whether that means that you say "no," spend the holidays a little differently than usual, or ask for your family's understanding and help.

10. Establish traditions with your children.

Establish traditions with your children, even new ones that may be off time or different from past rituals. Your kids may not remember the details of 2004, but year-in, year-out traditions will stay with them for a lifetime.

About the Author

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In Print: *The Truth About Children and Divorce: Dealing with the Emotions so You and Your Children Can Thrive*

Online: [Emery on Divorce](#)