

Kids, Divorce and the Holidays

The holidays can be hard for families that are going through a divorce. Many families have established traditions that they look forward to year after year. These traditions may include extended family, travel, religious rituals, festive parties, decorating a tree or cooking special holiday foods. Most parents want to make the holidays as celebratory and memorable as possible for their children and for themselves. Finding joy and peace during a time of upheaval may not even feel possible. Creating an atmosphere free from tension and conflict is a unique challenge during the time of a divorce when parents may have to share or divide some cherished traditions when the children are sharing their time with both parents. Even such traditions as decorating the house might feel bittersweet when you are feeling emotionally fragile and full of uncertainty about the future. It is even worse if you believe that your family home may not be your home next year. The first year after separation is a year of change and adjustments, and the first holiday season after you and your spouse have separated can be especially difficult. Here are some ideas that might make the holidays easier.

Plan ahead! Talk with your spouse about what kind of schedule will work during the holidays for you and for the kids. Try to focus on what the children might prefer. Perhaps you have already created a parenting plan with a holiday schedule, or if you have not done so, you might work with your divorce coach or mental health professional to develop a workable plan for this year. The more carefully you plan, the more you, and your children, can enjoy the holidays.

Consider whether you can share any part of the holiday season together with the children. For some children, seeing their parents celebrating together can be reassuring, and for others it can be confusing. Some divorcing parents would like to keep traditions going as a family, but if there is tension or conflict between them this is painful for the children. For example, some families spend Halloween together, while others decide to alternate annually. On Thanksgiving, you may celebrate on Thursday with the children one year, and on Friday the following year. The Christmas holidays include a long school break, so give thought to how you would like to share that time, particularly if holiday travel is part of your tradition.

Some families share Christmas by celebrating Christmas eve with one parent, and Christmas day with the other parent. Other families simply alternate the holiday each year. One family that finished their collaborative divorce agreed to celebrate together on Christmas morning, when the children opened their gifts and the family ate breakfast together. The rest of the holiday was split between Mom's and Dad's.

Like many families, you may be dealing with the financial stress of the divorce as you transition to supporting two households. Remember that the children's memories will not be of the gifts that you purchase—they will remember the warmth of the family time and activities, whether that is baking cookies, going for a bike ride, or watching a holiday show.

Take care of yourself. These holidays will be different, and you will begin to create new traditions and rituals for yourself and your family. When your children are with their other parent, do something you enjoy for yourself, perhaps with friends or family. And remember that the holidays do get easier as you build new traditions and memories. (Original post December 2013)

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