

Co-Parenting Through The Holidays



Holidays are such an exciting time! Children and their parents look forward to family traditions like picking out the tree, putting up the lights, drinking hot chocolate and watching Miracle on 34th Street, decorating gingerbread men and putting together the annual holiday puzzle. Just thinking about these things makes people feel warm inside.

For many families, these traditions get turned upside down when a divorce occurs. What felt good before now reminds them of what they no longer have. Instead of creating joy, there is grief and confusion.

While parents often feel like their heart is being ripped out when they have to share their children with their ex-spouse on a holiday, what the children go through is equally emotional. Children usually have no say in where they will be or when. Every time they go back and forth it is like re-living the divorce. Often a lot of acting out occurs in preparation for transitions (especially around the holidays) in reaction to the pain, hurt and anger children feel.

The best thing parents can do is help their children make the transition from one house to the other as smooth as possible. Children need to be able to count on their parents to act like adults. If you commit to do something, make sure you follow through. Don't make promises you don't intend to keep. If plans have been agreed upon for the holidays, don't change your plans at the last minute to get back at your ex-spouse. All you are really doing is hurting your children. When you act disrespectfully and don't keep your promises, they learn it is acceptable to treat people in the same manner. Not following through on your plans says to your children, "I don't care. You really aren't that important." This kind of behavior can be very detrimental to the wellbeing of your children who in many instances are wondering if their parents still love them.

As Christmas draws closer, here are some suggestions to help your children have the best holiday celebration possible:

- **Talk about the fact that transitions are difficult.** Ask for your child's input as plans are made. Sometimes just saying, "I don't have a choice and you don't have a choice, now how are we going to make the best of this situation?" can make things better for your child.
- **Make a plan.** Ask your child what you can do together to make the transition easier.
- **Be prepared.** Talk with your children about the possibility of plans changing at the last minute. Ask them what they would like to do. Acknowledge the pain.
- **Stay in the parent role.** While it might be tempting to be your child's buddy, that is not what they need from you. Once you cross this line it is very difficult to go back to being the parent.
- **Holidays can be celebrated any time.** Just because there is a designated day does not mean you can't set your own day to celebrate.
- **Think.** Before you make plans or change plans, ask yourself, "How will this affect my child?"

Parents have the responsibility and privilege of setting the mood for the holidays. Being considerate of your children as they adjust to this situation will help them create pleasant memories.

For more information, please [contact First Things First](#).



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As a Certified Family Life Educator Julie writes and speaks on issues related to strengthening marriages and families.

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