



Trauma
Care

Newsletter

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Holidays and Divorce

Handling Holidays After Divorce



TraumaCare
Box 1807, Magaliesview, 2067
5a Franshoek Rd, Lonehill
Tel: 0715929690
Website: www.traumacare.co.za
Email: mail@traumacare.co.za

Handling holidays and special occasions now that you are restructuring your family identity may require you to re-think some of your plans and expectations. It's important to think about how you want to handle holidays and other special occasions in your new family and not simply go on auto-pilot and expect that you will handle holidays as you have in the past. In fact, count on it that things are going to be different - not worse, just different!

Handling holidays and the expectations that accompany them about happy family times seem to be forever linked. Those expectations can create major stress for all families who are trying to handle holidays - not just divorced families.

Handling holiday celebrations is a challenge for most families. For divorced families, the stress meter can zing right off the charts. Along with tending to the requisite rituals of the season - school and church programs, baking, gifts, correspondence, and family gatherings, divorced parents find themselves living with a court document that dictates how holiday time with their children is to be spent. For most people that feels downright foreign.

Right now, before you do anything else, dig out your final divorce orders and re-read what it says about handling holidays.

You'd be surprised at how many people can't remember what they agreed to when it comes to handling holidays.



There are probably as many ways to handle holidays as there are divorced families. Ultimately the schedule that works for you will depend largely upon you and your child's other parent and the type of co-parenting relationship that you have.



- **Some families handle holidays by alternating each holiday.**

It is quite common to allot one parent "even-year" holidays and the other "odd-year" holidays. Alternating holidays means that you must deal with your disappointment about not spending every holiday with your children. You must get past the media hype that contributes to having unrealistic expectations about holidays. When you don't have your children with you, it is important for you to make plans to take care of yourself so that your children don't worry about you.

It is up to you to handle holidays in a healthy way for yourself when you aren't with your kids.

- **Some families choose to split each holiday.**

In this option for handling holidays, both parents get to spend some time with their children on each holiday. At the very least this option adds a parenting time transition to an already-jam-packed schedule. If seeing your child's other parent is exceptionally stressful for you or likely to involve a disagreement, this probably isn't the best option for handling holidays for your family. Some children can handle the chaos that accompanies frequent transitions between parents, while others simply can't. When you're making your plan, please think about your child's personality and what is going to work best for her.

- **A smaller number of families choose to handle the holiday celebration by spending the holiday together with their children.**

These parents dig deep within themselves and manage to be at the same table with each other. For some parents, this actually works. But if there is even the slightest chance of negativity, hurt feelings, or "bad vibes" don't force yourself and your children into this option for handling holidays.

- **And sadly, some parents don't see their children at all.**

They don't handle holidays at all. For them holiday celebrations can be especially difficult because they can't help but think about their children and how sad it is not to be with them.

Each of these scenarios holds the potential of being extremely stressful. Here are some practical, easy to apply guidelines to help you and your family handle the holidays and enjoy a stress-free holiday season.



Handling Holidays While Maintaining Your Grace and Sanity

- Accept your parenting plan and *choose* to make the best of it as it is. Schedule your holiday plans around your parenting agreement.
- Create and enforce a conflict-free zone around yourself and your children. Really.
- Focus on your time *with your children* instead of the time you aren't going to be together.
- Be ruthless about keeping your children out of the middle. Really put your children first. This means not placing them in the terrible position of having to choose between parents. As the adults, you find a way to work things out.
- Start new family traditions for your family. Instead of trying to replicate your old family traditions, create something completely new. Here are a few ideas: Take your kids to help serve meals to the homeless; adopt a family that is less fortunate than you; have a potluck dinner in place of your regular holiday meal; have a winter picnic; have a family pajama day. (You get the idea - break out of old thinking and get creative.)
- Be flexible. Find ways for everyone to "win." Holiday dates are much more important to adults than children. Children are usually quite happy celebrating a day or so late. In fact, depending on their age, your children may not even notice, for example, if you celebrate Christmas earlier or another day. And if it is a gift-giving holiday, what child is going to mind having two days to open presents instead of one?
- Steer clear of engaging in the "I can provide a better holiday than you can" competition with your child's other parent. Instead focus on developing and enjoying a quality relationship with your child.
- Help your child make or purchase a gift for the other parent. Yes, I really mean this! By doing so you are demonstrating respect for the other parent. And in the process you are modeling thoughtful and gracious behavior for your child. If you receive a gift from your child that you know the other parent helped with, graciously receive it. I've heard horror stories of parents throwing gifts away right in front of their children just because they came from the other parent or the other parent's girl friend.
- Stop trying to change or even influence your child's other parent. Chances are very good that it isn't going to happen. When it's all said and done, the only person you can change is yourself. The sooner you are able to accept this, the more peace of mind you'll have.
- Take good care of yourself. Get enough sleep, don't skip your exercise routine, make sure you are eating well, make use of your support systems, and remember to breathe deeply every day. You will handle the holidays much more effectively when you practice good self care. And as an added bonus, you model good self care for your children, so that they will also be able to experience a stress-free holiday.
- Be kind - to yourself, to your children, to your family, to your child's other parent, and to the many people you come in contact with on a daily basis. A little kindness can go a long way.

STRESS ON CHILDREN

Older children are not immune to divorce holiday stress. Children who live on their own may find it difficult to choose where to go and when. Young adults returning home for the holidays have the additional stress of wanting to spend time with their friends. Recently, a young couple, who were married within the last year saw a therapist to negotiate holidays. Both sets of parents were divorced and remarried.

They were caught in the trap of negotiating four sets of parents not to mention grandparents. Trying to please their parents, each other and themselves was putting stress on their marriage. They decided to rotate holidays, rather than try to see everyone on every holiday. Now instead of spending holidays driving all over the state, worrying about where they had to be next, they were able to relax and enjoy their time with all members of their families.

For younger children, the decision of where to go, and when should be decided by the parents. Having to choose to spend time with one parent, over the other is a tremendous burden for the child, which may result in the child feeling guilty.

It also gives the child more power than is appropriate. Your child does not decide whether he/she wants to go to school, but he/she may decide what to wear. Age-appropriate responsibilities enhance children's self esteem and confidence. Frequently divorced families fall into the trap of giving the children more power than is appropriate. To avoid this, make sure you have a support system you can turn to for advice and encouragement. One of the most difficult aspects of single parenting is not having another adult in the house to offer support and validation.

Divorcing parents are advised to determine where the children will celebrate, in writing, with the assistance of their divorce lawyers. This will prevent parental arguments and involvement of the children. The scheduling of holiday celebrations can be done creatively to fit each couple's unique situation. Parents can alternate Christmas Day and Christmas Eve, or allow the parent not having Christmas, the week between Christmas and New Years. It is important to put the agreement in writing to avoid misunderstandings and renegeing on the part of either party.

Expect the best outcome instead of the worst. Visualize yourself and your children having a wonderful, stress-free holiday - no matter how you spend it.



This newsletter has been issued by:

TraumaCare, Box 1807, Magaliesview, Gauteng, 2067

www.traumacare.co.za * mail@traumacare.co.za * Tel: 071 592 9690

Psychology * Play Therapy * Counselling

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