

Making Holidays Magical for Kids After Divorce

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When we think holidays, we think magical time of year for children.

But, when it comes to children of divorce – – not so fast. For far too many of these children, holidays mean split loyalties, guilt, sadness and regret.

Why *split loyalties*? Even if children have no choice as to where they are going to be for a holiday, the mere fact of being with one parent versus the other means an inherent sense of longing for all that could have been.

Why *guilt*? Children are acutely attuned to the fact that holiday conversations can quickly devolve into holiday vexations and that they are the identified cause of yet another source of exasperation between their parents.

Why *sadness*? Psychologists know that the experience of what they call “cognitive dissonance” is an exquisitely uncomfortable and irreconcilable state where two sets of emotions or thoughts cannot contemporaneously co-exist. Children wonder how they can

manage to have a joyous holiday with Dad while simultaneously longing to be with their Mom (who in this all too real scenario is ironically the one “home alone”).

Why *regret*? Many children of divorce naturally take on a tremendous burden, a syndrome known as “parentification,” whereby they feel that it is their grown-up responsibility to somehow proactively change the dynamic between their parents while inevitably recognizing that they are really too helpless to do so.

It always strikes me that, for most children of divorce, the heartache attendant to the holidays does not diminish as divorce anniversaries wax and wane: instead, this is a yearly occurrence that stirs and reawakens abject wounds and unhealed scars. Even as children become adolescents and young adults who “vote with their feet,” the mere fact of making a holiday choice reawakens the old worries: “How is my Mom going to feel since I am with my Dad this year? I hate making her so sad....”; or “It is just easier to be with friends so my parents don’t think I am choosing as between the two of them.”

Consider typical holiday custody provisions – does it resemble more of a bus schedule or a child-centered schedule?

Christmas

In 2017 and all applicable odd-numbered years, the children shall be with the Father on December 24 as of noon until December 25 at noon, at which time the Father shall drop the children off at the Mother's residence. The children shall remain with the Mother for the first half of the remainder of the Winter break, at which point the Mother shall drop the children off at the Father's residence for the second half of the Winter break. In 2018 and all applicable even-numbered years, the parties shall use the reverse of that schedule.

Yet, despite best efforts to make these schedules as clear and even-handed for the parents as possible, glitches still arise. I recall vividly one case in particular in which, as a Parenting Coordinator, I was asked to make the following decision: since the children were not supposed to be with the Mother until noon on Christmas Eve Day, her request that they fly out to her on an 11:50 a.m. flight was denied by the Father since it did not comply with the agreed upon schedule. The Father felt that the Mother had purposefully sabotaged his time with the children by attempting to circumvent the mutually negotiated schedule by booking an earlier (by 10 minutes!) flight.

In an interesting twist, I have spoken with many adult children of divorce who have instituted a parenting plan for their divorced parents. Thanksgiving is *always* with Mom and Christmas is *always* with Dad: now that the proverbial empowerment shoe is on the other foot, it is frequently the parents who feel shortchanged. But no matter who is in control of the planning, the fact remains

that these children of divorce feel no less wistful that they have to do workarounds because their parents literally refuse to come to the holiday table together.

Recently, my client told me that she and her ex-spouse spent the first night of Chanukah together with their teenage son. Whereas Dad lavished Michael with 10 gifts, Mom presented Michael with just one present. It was not lost on Michael that his parents were off to the races as they jockeyed to win the gifting competition.... not surprisingly, Michael did not enjoy a moment of the celebration as he self-consciously felt obliged to give each parent's gift precise equal measures of thanks and praise.

Are there any antidotes to making the holidays a happier time of year for children of divorce?

As to those divorced parents who manage to put the best interests of their children first and foremost, they have my utmost admiration and respect. I am particularly impressed with parents who even manage to share a holiday meal or tradition together so that their children can have the best of all worlds. From a psychological standpoint, although this can mean that parents are directly playing into a child's fantasy of having their parents reunite, I believe the modeling of putting past conflicts behind them (at least for the day or dinner) far outweighs the risks of feeding the fantasy.

But if emotions are still too raw such that divorced parents do not feel they can endure a family meal, then I would urge them to consider other creative ways to inject joy into their children's holidays. One such option might entail the pooling of their resources to buy their child a single and meaningful present. In this way, the child can always reflect back and remember fondly that this gift was from both parents who were able to at least make an agreement over the choice of a present – even if they cannot agree on a host of other matters.

Another option is to ensure that you, or your child, has a gift for the other parent: this signals the message that despite the demise of the marital bond, your parental devotion to the spirit of the holiday is alive and well. Last year, when my ex-husband and his wife came to pick up our daughter so they could start their holiday time together, I presented him with a box of chocolates – simply saying that I hoped they were still his particular favorites and reminiscing with him about the time that our dog ate a pound of chocolates the day we got engaged. It was a delicious, joyful and unexpected moment all around. I will never forget the look of surprise and appreciation on our daughter's face as she got to watch us in a rare tender moment. He, of course, was stunned and grateful. And his wife, recognizing the simple gesture for what it was meant to be, was gracious about the whole interaction.

So, as the holidays approach, let's use our parental wizardry to enable our children to again bask in the magic of the season by transforming what might otherwise be bittersweet reminiscences into joyous memories.

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