

6 tips

to make divided holidays easier



By Katie Markey McLaughlin

The holidays are meant to be a joyous time of celebration with loved ones, but for families who have to split them between different parents and multiple locations, it can be anything but.

Trying to determine where your children will go and how gifts will be exchanged—not to mention how you're going to respond to that passive aggressive text you just got from your ex—is enough to zap anyone of the holiday spirit. If you're splitting the holidays this year, be it due to your own divorce or that of your parents, these tips can help you cope so that the season remains a time of joy for your family.

★ Put your children first.

During the holidays, divorce or separation can leave everyone in the family unit extremely stressed—especially if the change is a recent one. “The children’s needs should take precedence in planning for the holidays since they are most vulnerable at this time,” said Tracy M. Richards, a family and couples therapist in Hershey. For most families, that means helping the children stay

connected with parents and extended families on both sides, even if that’s not what you as the parent would prefer.

★ Communicate, communicate, communicate.

Not surprisingly, communication is often difficult in split families, even more so around the holidays. But if there’s ever a time to try to communicate it is now. One key to effective communication is to start early. Begin having conversations as soon as possible about who will be visiting which parent when, how drop off and pick up will work and how gifts will be exchanged. “Don’t assume it will work out without planning,” advised Todd Drazien of Drazien Family Counseling Center in Harrisburg. “Discuss details ahead of time to ensure everyone has a happy holiday season.”

★ Talk openly about emotions.

Feelings of sadness and anger are common in both children and adults navigating split holidays. To deal with them effectively, kids and grown ups alike should work on expressing those emotions in healthy ways.

Richards suggested parents use open-ended questions—ones like, “How does it make you feel that we won’t be together to put cookies out for Santa because you will be with mommy then?”—to help

children explore what they’re feeling in a non-threatening way.

Remember that you can encourage children to talk about their feelings without forcing them. “Sometimes just letting them know the door is always open is enough,” said Drazien.

★ Accept some degree of conflict.

No matter how much you plan and how hard you try to communicate well, some conflict may still arise. And that’s OK. “Holidays don’t occur without some conflict,” Drazien explained. “Try to prepare by accepting that it will occur.” Letting go of your dream of a drama-free holiday season will help you respond appropriately to conflict when it happens.

★ Ease the physical transition.

For children, leaving one parent or side of the family to go visit the other is often the most difficult time.

Many kids find it challenging to “stop the activities with one parent and restart with the other,” Richards said. What’s more, “small children often are not able to conquer the concept of time, and so cannot be prepared for the transition and feel confused about where they are to be.”

Try your best to ease that confusion by having both sides explain to the children when the transition is coming, how it will

occur, and why it’s important.

★ Remember it will get better.

If this is your first time splitting the holidays, it will likely be the toughest. “Often the first sets of holidays, birthdays, vacations and anniversaries are the hardest,” explained Richards. “The painful reality of the broken family is most pronounced then.”

But as everyone continues to adjust and heal—and new traditions are made and accepted—split holidays will become less and less painful.

“Do your best to put things in perspective,” Drazien said. “The holidays are about something bigger than ourselves.”

COPY Katie Markey McLaughlin is a freelance writer based in Pennsylvania.

