

# Making the Best of Co-Parenting Situations During the Holidays

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For more than twenty-five years, The Center for Divorce Education has been dedicated to helping parents and children deal with the difficult process of divorce and separation. Based on our extensive research, we have developed highly effective methods for reducing the stress of divorce and separation for all parties.

## Co-Parenting During the Holidays

The holidays are just around the corner! While they're often joyful and happy, they can also be stressful times for any family. However, this season can be especially tough for families that are recently separated or divorced, or are contemplating breaking up.

**Protect your kids from the stress of their changing family situation this holiday season.**

Kids are easily influenced and often remember holidays for a lifetime. It's important for them to associate holidays with happy times, even under difficult circumstances.

Here are some helpful tips I've used in my more than thirty years of practice as a child and family psychologist:

- **Holidays are for children - they should be center stage.** If you can be civil or friendly with the other parent, consider celebrating part of the holidays together. You may not be ready for this quite yet. But now is a great time to establish your own new traditions with your kids that you can repeat every year!
- **All of your family will have a range of feelings this holiday.** Kids, moms, and dads will experience ups and downs. Let everyone have the chance to feel what he or she is going to feel. As an adult, label those feelings to yourself, and know that it's OK to feel that way. By practicing this, those unpleasant feelings will lose some of their power to control you over time. Call on a wise friend, a counselor, or your spiritual advisor if you need a hand working through your feelings.
- **What do the kids want to do?** Talk to your children to see what they'd like to do and whom they'd like to see over the holidays. Can you help make some of those things happen for them?



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- **Slow down a little** - If you're rushed to have the kids see all their relatives in a limited time, realize that you just may not be able to do it all this year. Jam-packing the holiday with obligations may cause even more stress for your children (and you as a parent). Chances are that the kids are still grieving the loss of their family and may need a slower pace.
- **Take care of yourself** - Kids are often reflections of our own moods. If you can be calm, they'll be more likely to be calm - and we all know the reverse is true too! So be kind to yourself. Exercise, eat healthy food, get good sleep, enjoy close friends, meditate, pray, relax.
- **Make travel fun** - Bring along activities for your children to enjoy. Stay positive and keep smiling, even when you are stressed. Take the time to talk with your kids and look for opportunities to laugh together.
- **Try a random act of kindness – on your ex!** - Surprise your former partner (and maybe yourself) by being a little kinder or flexible than usual on the phone or in person. It's possible you'll feel really great for the effort!
- **Take a break from the blame game – learn to use I-messages** – Do you have a complaint that you need to share with your co-parent? Try using an I-message instead of blaming. Here's an example:
  - Blame: "You make me crazy when you're always late to pick up the kids! Why can't you be responsible?"
  - I-Message: "I really feel stressed when the schedule for the kids gets off track. Can we work together somehow to smooth this out for all of us?"

I-messages are a new way of communicating for many of us and take some practice.
- **Put a stop the trash talk** - Often family and friends will try to show you support by bad-mouthing your children's other parent – END THIS NOW! Your kids identify with each of you; when someone criticizes either parent, kids often apply that criticism to themselves.
- **Share the kids – even when it's "your time" with them** - Let your children talk to or see their other parent on the holiday that you have them. They will really miss their other parent on these days.
- **Communicate, coordinate, and then, be flexible** - Plan early with your co-parent about the holiday schedule. Be really specific about dates and times and send the agreement to each other by email. That way, things will go more smoothly and you'll have fewer misunderstandings later. But be prepared to make changes according to the kids' needs – stuff comes up!
- **Make an agreement around gifts** - Talk about gifts you plan to give the children to avoid duplication. Avoid trying to one-up the other parent with a better or more expensive gift. Consider doing an activity instead of giving a material gift. They can be less expensive, won't break or become outdated, and you and your child(ren) will form great memories.
- **Stop-Look-Listen** – Try this method when you find yourself about to get into an argument with your co-parent:
  - **Stop** yourself from reacting in anger by taking deep breaths, making yourself aware of your feelings.
  - **Look** at all your options for responding and pick the one that will keep the conflict from growing.
  - **Listen** to your better nature and choose the response that shows understanding, wisdom, and kindness.
- **Above all, give your kids permission to love their other parent and their family.** They are connected to their other family and your kids should not have to hide it from you.

For more helpful tips about dealing with co-parenting please visit our web site: [divorce.education.com](http://divorce.education.com)