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Sharing custody at holidays



If the thought of sharing custody of the kids this holiday season has got you feeling like the Grinch, experts have some advice for you: Get over it.

Stop focusing on yourself, and start focusing on the kids.

"The most important thing to keep in mind is the best interests of your child," said Barry Finkel, a Fort Lauderdale divorce and family law attorney. "A lot of times divorce is highly emotional, and the vision of what is really important gets cloudy."

So take a deep breath. And think about what arrangements will work best for your child. With some advance planning, cooperation and flexibility, families and children of divorce and separation can enjoy a nice holiday with both parents.

"Holidays are an especially sensitive time for children because in the background, they have memories of the way things were before," said Rosalind Sedacca, a parenting and divorce coach who runs www.childcentereddivorce.com. "With a divorce, you have to decide what traditions are going to remain the same, what's going to change, and what new traditions are we going to be made."

Here are some tips from the experts:

Share the celebration

If the family historically has shared a holiday dinner, gift exchange or other ritual, continue the practice – if you and your ex can get along. "It's different for each family, but if you can continue what worked for your family in the past,

that's the happiest scenario for the kids," Sedacca said.

"Divorce doesn't mean you're no longer a family. It's just that the format has changed," she said. "The key question is 'Do I love my child more than I hate my ex?'"

Plan ahead

Try to plan holiday festivities around the existing co-parenting schedule. The routine provides stability – especially for younger children. If there is a lot of hostility between you and your ex, use a tool like www.ourfamilywizard.com, a software program with an annual fee, to work out the details of your time sharing, Finkel said.

Be flexible

If you set up guidelines, like you get the kids on the odd years and your ex on the even years, be prepared to bend some. Maybe you have to work, or your ex has some relatives coming in from out of town. Keep the lines of communication open to discuss these things.

"Put your personal feelings on the back burner," Finkel said. "You are going to have to sacrifice. Things are going to change. Everybody is going to have to make adjustments."

Don't argue in front of the kids

If you're fighting about who's going to get Christmas or Christmas Eve in front of the children, the kids are going to feel terrible, Finkel said. "Then they will start feeling like they are the cause of the trouble between you two and start blaming themselves."

Don't ask the kids for input

"Don't ask the kids who they would rather spend Christmas with," Finkel said. "It's not a contest." Though kids will likely express where they want to be, it's the adult's job to say "you'll be here on this day, and there on that day," he said.

Be cordial

If you and your ex divide up a holiday, take the high road when it's time for the exchange. "If the two just can't get along, do the exchange at a public place, like Publix or a mall," Finkel said. But if you can be civil, there's no reason for dad to wait in the driveway for the kids to come out. Let him walk to the front door and knock. "You have to keep kids secure, even if the parents don't love each other anymore and can't be married," he said.

Divide the day

If both families traditionally celebrate Christmas day, split the day in half, with one parent getting Christmas morning one year, and afternoon or evening the next. The same should be applied for New Years, and other holidays, like Kwanzaa or Hanukkah, where eight days bring eight opportunities to celebrate.

Plan something for yourself

If this is the first special holiday you will be alone, don't put a guilt trip on your child, Finkel said. "You made a deal.

Live with it and own it," he said. "Don't transfer guilt to your children."

Establish ways to connect in advance, through emails or a phone conversation, Sedacca said. "It makes a connection and helps ease the pain," she said. "Don't stay at home and have a pity party." Get out with friends, or volunteer at a hospital or food bank.

Keep your child's spirits up

If your child is sad that he won't be with you on a holiday this year, sit down and discuss it with him, Finkel said. It helps to look at divorce from your child's perspective, Sedacca said. "Sometimes adults get so caught up in their own drama that they forget about what the child is going through," she said. Keep the child connected with the other parent by cards, Skype, text, email or making and sharing videos. Show compassion and model good behavior. Never badmouth your ex or argue with them in front of your child.

Meet the needs of out-of-town family

If grandparents or other family members fly in for the holidays, relax the time-sharing agreement. "If they haven't seen their cousins in a long time, there's no reason they shouldn't see their cousins," Finkel said.

Make new traditions

Go to new places, see different people and experience new adventures, so the kids don't have to compare to what you did in previous years, Sedacca said. There will be new spouses and new families and new traditions to establish. "That's life," Finkel said. "That's what you have to teach your children, that things are going to change, and you have to embrace it."

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