

Helping Children of Divorce Through the Holidays



In a Surviving the Holidays interview, Linda Ranson Jacobs shares wise and practical advice on how to help your children through the holidays.

by Linda Ranson Jacobs

Q: Why is the interruption of routines so difficult for a child?

Linda: One thing that makes the holidays difficult for children is the interruption of routines and rituals. Routines lend themselves to a sense of security, and everyone knows that routines go out the window during the holiday times. Please try to keep the routines the same as before, as much as you can. When things have to change, let your child know: “Things are going to be a little bit different today. We’re going to do such and such.” Routines, rituals and traditions are very important to children.

Q: Why is it important to keep some of the same routines for kids during the holidays?

Linda: Many times during the holidays as parents we want to protect our children, so we try to make everything different, and sometimes that’s a mistake. Sometimes it’s okay to keep things the same. Children feel security in routines and traditions, so sit down, talk to the children and ask them what they want to change, but let them know you still want to keep some things the same. Go with the flow of what your children want to do. And any change you make, you need to feel comfortable with, too, because if you don’t feel comfortable, that’s going to impact the children.

Q: Why are Thanksgiving and Christmas so stressful to children of divorce?

Linda: With all the rushing around at the holidays—parties, church, concerts, plays, shopping—you still have to work, and you get stressed out. Think of the child. They feel the stress both in your family and in your ex’s family. They have double whammies of stress. Children do get very stressed out during the holidays.

Think about this: say Thanksgiving Day comes and your children are with you. You are celebrating Thanksgiving at your parent’s home, and all the little cousins are there. Just about the time the children are really involved in the games, somebody packs them up and now they’ve got to go to another house. So the children enter another scene: this scene is already taking place. These little cousins are already playing games, so your children have to navigate into the structure of the cousins already playing. Just about the time they feel comfortable, whoops, they’ve got to go to another home. Over and over. Some children are going to eat two, three and even four large meals on Thanksgiving Day. Thanksgiving Day is not a fun day for many children of divorce.

Q: Why do children struggle with anger during the holiday season?

Linda: During the holiday season many children will experience a tremendous amount of anger due to the divorce. The child may be thinking, “How come Dad didn’t think of me before he left? He just wants to be over there in that apartment by himself. Well, he deserves to be all alone at Christmastime. I don’t care.” When the child really does care. There is a lot of anger that floats around for the child of divorce.

Q: Why do children struggle with guilt during the holiday season?

Linda: Most children of divorce secretly feel the divorce is their fault, and this feeling goes on for a long time. When children feel the divorce is their fault, it causes a lot of guilt feelings in them. This is particularly true if they see Mom crying or if Dad gets mad and tries to smash his fist into the wall. The children take on tremendous amounts of guilt for what they think is their fault.

Q: What can parents do to keep a child from feeling guilty during the holidays?

Linda: Telling children of divorce not to feel guilty or that it’s not their fault doesn’t work. Let’s say Dad told the child to empty the trash, and the child didn’t do it, and the next day Dad moves out. The child may feel like because he or she didn’t empty the trash, Dad moved out. As a parent, try to determine before you ever get to the holidays what the child is thinking. You can do this by observing and listening to your children’s conversations when talking to their friends and to each other. When you discover something, sit down and listen to the child and say, “Dad didn’t leave because you didn’t take out the trash. Dad left because Dad wanted to leave. It has nothing to do with you and the fact you didn’t take out the trash. Divorce is an adult problem.”

Q: What other thoughts and feelings may go through a child of divorce at Christmas?

Linda: Holidays bring up for children what used to be happy memories. They may wonder, “Are we ever going to have another happy Christmas?” This is particularly true if one of the parents has moved on. Then the children have to deal with stepfamilies. They may think, “Does Mom love that family, her new family, more than she loves me?” Sometimes in blended families, the children from one side may receive nice, expensive gifts from their grandparents, but the other children do not get those types of gifts. That brings up a lot of anger in children too.

Q: How do you keep the dialogue going throughout the holidays with your child?

Linda: Keep the dialogue going all during the holidays. Be sure to have a lot of connections at meal times. Concentrate on helping the children label their feelings. You might say at dinner, “Whoa, I had a rough day today. I got to thinking about last year when your mom was here. I was thinking I wanted her to be here this year, but that just wouldn’t work. If your mom were here, she wouldn’t be happy, and then we’d all be miserable. So I decided to try to think about something to cheer myself up, and I started thinking about Jesus laying in that little manger and all the animals around—the cows and the sheep. And that made me feel more peaceful.”

Q: What are people’s motives for getting together with an ex over the holidays?

Linda: Be really honest with yourself about why you want to get together with the ex. You may be saying it’s for your children, but really investigate your motives. Is it because secretly you hope the memories of a happier time will bring your ex home? Or maybe

you're so proud of the way your life is going and you want to flaunt that in front of your ex; you want to bring your ex in to show him or her your new house or your new apartment. Think about what your motives are because if your motives are not pure and about the children, the children will feel it. They'll know it's not about them. It's still all about you. Your children will suffer tremendously. It'll just make them feel like pawns in a game, and it will diminish the children.

Q: How does celebrating Christmas with an ex keep children from accepting the reality of the divorce?

Linda: Many times when parents decide to celebrate Christmas together for the children, they think it will make the holidays better for the children. But most children secretly wish their parents would get back together again, so you're giving them false hope. Even though both parents may say, "We're not getting back together; we're just going to do this for Christmas," the children are secretly sure this is going to work out, that Dad or Mom is going to come home, that everything is going to be wonderful. For many children it's not wise to have Christmas together. You just have to know your children and your own situation.

Q: What if a parent is involved in a new relationship over the holidays?

Linda: Concentrate on the children and how you can make the holidays the best they can be for them. This is not about you. You may be involved in a new romantic relationship. You may be excited and have all these feelings bubbling up. Put that aside for the holidays. The holidays are for your children. What can you do to make your holidays better? Many experts say it takes children three to five years just to get back to a sense of being normal again after a divorce. If you

interrupt that process by bringing a new person on the scene too early, you will hinder the healing and it will take the children even longer to heal from the divorce.

Q: Sometimes parents inadvertently say things to the children that make the children feel guilty. How can parents keep from making their children feel guilty during the holidays?

Linda: As you make plans for celebrating Christmas or being alone, share those plans with your children, but be careful how you share them. Do it in an uplifting manner; for instance, "While you guys are over at your Dad's/Mom's, this is going to be a great time for me to be alone and celebrate Christmas. I'm going to have a joyful time, and I'm going to be praying for you. We'll connect on Christmas Eve by phone, and remember that I want you kids to have a great time because I'm going to have a great time by myself. I might even take a bubble bath that day."

Having been both divorced and widowed, Linda Ranson Jacobs was a single mom who learned firsthand the emotional and support needs of broken families, and she developed a passion to help hurting families. Today she is one of the forefront leaders in the area of children and divorce, assisting countless families as a speaker, author, trainer and program developer. Linda is the DivorceCare for Kids (DC4K) creator, developer and executive director. See DC4K.org for details about this excellent program for children of separation and divorce.

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