

Why Do Children Struggle with Guilt during the Holiday Season?



Holidays can bring feelings of guilt for children of divorce.

by Linda Ranson Jacobs

Many children feel like the divorce is their fault. So when the holidays come around, this feeling of being responsible for the breakup of the family creates a lot of guilt. Seeing Mom cry or Dad smash his fist into a wall will deepen the struggle with feeling guilty.

Some children might feel because of the divorce, they shouldn't be happy or display any excitement toward the holidays, especially if they are witnessing sad or angry parents. They may even feel guilty for not being sad twenty-four hours a day.

As a single parent, what can you do to keep a child from feeling guilty during the holidays when you yourself may be experiencing some guilt feelings? First, let's address your guilt feelings. A dad might question: "Is Jimmy going to miss me on Christmas morning when he gets up and sees all the gifts under the tree? Is he going to wonder if I can come over and help him play his new computer game?" Or a mom might worry about the teen daughter, "Is Susie wondering how I'm doing all alone while she is at her dad's new girlfriend's house?" "Is Champ going to cry when he goes to sleep tonight because I wasn't there to read him the Christmas story out of the Bible?" As parents you will need to be careful not to let your feelings of guilt flow over to your children. It's not fair for them to take on your guilt. One of the first things you can do is turn your guilt feelings over to the

Lord. Ask our Father to protect you from feeling guilty and to protect your children.

Next, allow the children to experience happy times with the other parent and the other parent's extended family if possible. You can model for your children healthy emotions. It's okay for them to know that you also miss how things used to be. You might try making brief matter-of-fact comments during the holidays. Maybe you come home from a church service or a Christmas cantata and you are singing or humming the music. At that point, in front of your children, you can say something like: "I loved that song they sang. You know the one that said, 'He knows my name. He knows my every thought ...' It reminded me so much of how your grandmother, your dad's mother, would always start singing around Christmastime. I love remembering how sweet her voice sounded. I sure hope you get to spend some time with her this year." And keep right on humming or singing. This will say to the child, It is okay to be happy. It is okay to remember the happy times.

Telling children not to feel guilty doesn't work. Before you ever get to the holidays, try to determine what the child is thinking. Maybe a son thinks the divorce is his fault because his dad told him to take out the trash and he didn't. The next day dad moves out. The child is sure it's his fault Dad left because he didn't take out the trash. A wise parent can sit the child down and say, "Dad left because divorce is an adult thing. He

didn't leave because you didn't take out the trash."

Keep the dialogue going all during the holidays. Concentrate on helping the children label how they are feeling. Label your own feelings in front of your child. An example that includes something about the other parent might go something like this: "Whoa, today was kind of a hard day for me. I got to thinking about last Christmas when your mom was here. For a few minutes I felt really sad and wished she would come home for Christmas. But I know she wouldn't be happy here, and then we would all be miserable. I decided to cheer myself up by thinking about Jesus laying in that tiny little manger and the donkeys and cattle all around him. Do you think maybe the animals wanted to nibble on that hay in the manger?"

Some children may feel guilty if they spend the actual holiday with one parent, knowing the other parent is alone. Or if they have a good time, they may feel guilty upon returning home again. Assure your children that you are fine while they are gone. Make plans ahead of time and share with them a little about your plans. If you are choosing to stay home alone, make it sound okay to the kids and that this is a choice you made.

One child shared that she got an expensive gift from her dad. She really enjoyed and liked the gift, but she felt guilty about the gift and also about wanting to talk about the gift to her best friend. She knew her mom couldn't afford such a nice gift. Take delight in what your children receive from others.

The issue of gifts can bring up a lot of guilt for the children. This is especially true if the parents try to outdo each other. Or even if the grandparents and other extended family get involved in the gift giving. The child becomes a pawn in the game of "Let's see who can

out-give the other parent." Children feel guilty about the amount of money spent. They feel guilty that they are getting nice things when what they really want is attention and love, or for their parents to get back together.

One young teen was taken to the dad's girlfriend's parents' house on Christmas Day. The parents had planned ahead and had many presents under the tree for the young lady. However, no one had told her there were going to be presents, and she shared later that she felt guilty at receiving so many presents when she had nothing to give in return. This bothered the young lady for many weeks after Christmas. Children of divorce deserve respect for their feelings and even for who they are. This dad should have planned in advance. He could have taken a small candle or something the child could have given to these gracious people.

Christmas can be a joyous occasion with true moments of awe mixed in. Just think about the shepherds out in the field in the middle of the night and an angel appearing before them. Suddenly a host of angels are praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:14). Just thinking about moments like that can bring humbleness of heart and a sense of awe! As a single parent it is up to each of us to minister to our children during the holidays. Don't let them miss out on the splendor of this time. Don't allow the guilt to become the overriding factor. Do allow them to feel and sense the peace that the angels praised God for when the shepherds were out in the fields.

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