

Thinking about Celebrating the Holidays with Your Ex?



Learn how celebrating the holidays with your ex can keep your children from accepting the reality of the divorce.

by Linda Ranson Jacobs

Many divorced parents will attempt to celebrate the holidays like one big happy family. Sometimes this is a great idea, but more than likely you will be among the many families where this rarely works out. Before you contact your ex to make the suggestion to spend the holidays together, let's take some time to explore this idea.

First, what is the real reason you want to spend the holidays with the person who is no longer a part of your daily life? I can hear many of you saying, "Well, I think it's best for the children." Because of the divorce, the family unit, as the children have known it, has been changed forever. Your children have been adjusting to this situation. They have had to learn to live in two different households: yours and their other parent's. Even though you may tell your children you are not getting back together, in some children's minds spending the holidays together may indicate something different.

For many children, the coming together as one big happy family will only serve to build hope in the child's mind that maybe, just maybe, my parents will get back together again. One mother overheard her elementary-age child talking to his sister, "Hey sis, isn't it great that Dad's coming over for Christmas? We need to try and be really good so that him and Mom will remember how happy we used to be. Then maybe he'll come back home again."

Keep in mind that most kids feel like the divorce is somehow their fault. Their grandiose dreaming during the holidays is to get the parents back together. To add to the problem during the holidays, we encourage children to dream about their wishes for gifts. Grandparents and other family and friends make promises of getting the children what they want for Christmas. Secretly, many children wish for the gift of waking up on Christmas morning with their parents back together. If you do decide to spend Christmas with the other spouse, make sure you sit down with your children in advance and explain that this is only going to happen because of the holidays. Otherwise you may be setting your children up for a huge crash after the holidays.

On the other hand, some children are going to be very stressed thinking about their two parents being in one house for an extended period of time. They may think, *What happens if Mom and Dad start fighting and arguing? Or, Oh great, Mom and Dad in the same room. Yippee, I can feel the awkwardness already.* If one of the parents has decided to start dating, then the children may wonder if the significant other is also going to show up. If so, then they agonize how the other parent is going to handle this. Children in general are protective of their parents. They may want to shield and protect you from being hurt again. For this child, the holidays become a very stressful time. They can't enjoy our Savior's birth because of the

stress and the anxiety that is building within them.

Another reason one divorced parent might want to celebrate the holidays with the ex is to secretly show the ex how well they are doing. You may want to flaunt your new life. Don't do it. While you appear to be doing fine and are acting quite happy, your children may still be struggling. This could place a barrier between you and your children. They question how you, as their parent, can be so happy and yet they are sad, angry and sullen. They need you to be the parent they can trust and count on to notice they are still struggling. Instead of wanting to show your ex how well you are doing, take this time of year to focus on your children.

Concentrate on helping your children label how they are feeling. Many children really don't know how they are feeling. Or their feelings are scattered and they flip from being angry to being sad to being excited, back to feeling sad or lonely, especially during the holidays. Label your own feelings and model this before the child. At the evening meal you might say, "Whoa, today was a kind of 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 that 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?" This says to the child that it's okay to feel sad and it's okay to feel happy and move forward.

If you are the parent who didn't want the marriage to dissolve, then you might possibly have a hidden agenda to try and entice the other parent to reconcile the marriage. You

think, *If only I could get the other parent to realize how much he/she is missing out on by not being with the kids at Christmas, then maybe the other parent will come back.*

Instead of using the holidays to prod the other parent to return, go to the Lord and lay your petitions before Him. Allow the Lord to work in His time.

Right now as you enter the holiday season, put all of your efforts into celebrating our Savior's birth for that very reason—His Birth. Otherwise you may unknowingly allow the holidays to become all about the adults, and when that happens, the kids will feel like pawns in a game. It will diminish them and only serve to add additional stress. Instead, put in your mind how you are going to celebrate the holidays as a new family unit. You are now a single parent. Face the reality that your children live in a single parent family.

Sit down and visit with your children before everyone becomes involved in the holidays. Ask them how they want the holiday celebrations to be this year. You may be thinking, *But what if they ask me if we can spend the holidays all together again? What do I say to them then?* Be very matter of fact and tell them you understand how they are feeling. You might even tell them that you have thought about it too, but you realized that it would not serve any purpose but to prolong learning to move forward with your lives. Be empathetic and tender with your explanation, but also take the tone of voice that says, "This is how it's going to be, and we are going to be okay." Then turn the conversation back to the reason we celebrate the holidays. Focus on the Savior's birth.

Get the Bible out and read the Christmas story in the second chapter of Luke. Talk about how you might decorate your home differently this year. Discuss contacting the

other set of grandparents and what the kids want to do for their grandparents for Christmas. Ask the children if they want to make something special for their teachers at school or for their teachers in their church classes or the neighbor next door. Your attitude and concentrating on the children and their ideas will go far in creating a new kind of holiday season this year. You will be allowing everyone to continue on this journey of healing.

Allow your children to call and make plans with the other parent. Encourage them to make cards and gifts for the other parent. If possible, let the children make their plans with the other parent without involvement from you. If the other parent weakens to the children's pleas to spend the holidays together, be matter of fact and simply tell everyone that it is not possible. Be upbeat and move forward with your plans.

Lastly, for yourself go to the Word. Take time for yourself; read various passages of Scripture. Take comfort and joy in the Christmas story in the Bible. Make this Christmas between you and the Savior. Develop an intimacy with God. When I did this, I found what had been a hidden passage to me before, but all of a sudden it jumped out at me. These two verses became a balm to my hurting heart: "And Mary said: 'My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior'" (Luke 1:46-47).

Just as Mary approached the coming birth of her firstborn son, perhaps you can approach the holidays with rejoicing. Rejoice over the fact that you have children. Rejoice because they love you. Rejoice because we have the holiday season. Rejoice!

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