

Holiday Parenting Doesn't Have To Be A "War of the Roses"!

By

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The holidays are here and it's time for sharing your children's holiday time with your ex. I did some on-line research and talked with experienced Kalamazoo Family Law attorneys about the common problems for divorced parents this season and how to avoid or handle them.

There's still time to make arrangements to improve the chances of a happy holiday season. Your children want and need the support and love of both their parents. When you arrange a smooth holiday experience for them, it reduces their stress and insecurity and possibly ensures the season will be a memorable and positive experience.

Family law practitioners tell me that a client problem they dread at this time of year is the phone call shortly before Christmas from an hysterical, angry mom who says "He's taking Johnny to his parents in New York for Christmas. My parents are driving in from Iowa and won't get to see him at all. Do something."

Erika Salerno, a Kalamazoo Family Law attorney, said, "I contact all my clients by November 1st to see if they have a holiday plan in place and if their spouse agrees. If not, we negotiate the schedule to avoid hassles. To avoid problems, you have to plan well in advance and firm up the details. As a result, I don't get the panicked phone calls. There should even be plans for bad weather and emergencies if you're out of town or have visiting relatives. Communication and early planning are the keys. Sometimes, if the couple is willing, we may need to bring in a neutral facilitative mediator to help them make arrangements that will eliminate future battles."

Attorney Gail Towne of Kalamazoo agrees that pre-planning is necessary. "Most parenting plans need to be very specific, so that when there is a disagreement, they have something written down to refer to. One of the biggest problems of holiday planning is the coveted Christmas morning. Parents fight to get the "right" to wake up to the magic of the morning, go down stairs to open presents, have breakfast and go to church together. Unfortunately, there is only one Christmas morning each year and parents need to share the magic. They need to create new traditions to be used on alternate years, such as opening presents and going to church on Christmas Eve. Being creative sets a great example for children and keeps them out of the middle of any potential conflict between the parents."

Kalamazoo divorce attorney, Tom Birkhold, suggests that it's important for parents to be role models for their children when it comes to their behavior to each other over holiday parenting time. He says, "Remember you and your spouse are the ones who divorced, not your children. They didn't sue for divorce, you did. So, even if you and your spouse can't be in the same room together, don't let your animosity ruin the holidays for your kids. Don't bad mouth your ex in front of the kids and don't react emotionally if he does it. Be a role model of good behavior."

Birkhold also says, "It's the holiday season of good will and peace. Why not use it as an opportunity to actually improve your relationship with your ex, even if it's only for the sake of the children. Kids can cope with divorce a lot better if they see that you treat

each other with respect, especially in how you each talk about and handle your parenting responsibilities."

Here is a suggestion from my own experience in mediating parenting schedules. Don't try to buy your children's loyalty and affection by "one-upmanship" when getting Christmas gifts and toys. The kids know what you're doing and you're actually teaching them to manipulate you. Instead of one-upping your ex, cooperate with him on the gifts and toys to avoid duplicates and excess. In fact, if your children receive what looks like the entire contents of your local Toys-R-Us, have them choose one or more items to give to children who aren't so lucky.

Go on the web for advice. There are several sites with seasonal guides for divorced parents. I suggest you go to Divorcemag.com "Top Ten Tips for Divorced Parents" and Dadomatic.com for divorced dads with tips specifically aimed at men. Share that with your ex.

To repeat, it's important to remember to plan as early as possible for your holiday and annual parenting schedule. In the worst circumstances, that may involve the help of your attorney and a judge. In the best of cases, you and your ex meet regularly to update your parenting schedule to meet changing needs.

Somewhere in the middle are the circumstances where you just can't see eye to eye and your discussions turn to fights neither of you want. Here is where a trained counselor or facilitative mediator can help you reach a workable solution for the best interests of the kids. Look, if mediators were able to end the sectarian fighting in Northern Ireland and start a peaceful relationship between the warring factions, the same techniques should be able to help you with a parenting plan.

If you need help learning how to communicate with your ex without bringing out the tanks and artillery, go to divorcemag.com and read their article on "Learning to cooperate with your ex." The article will teach you techniques to deal with anger so that you can actually listen to your ex with a more open mind. It's to your benefit and your children's to learn how to get past your old hard positions, attitudes, and perceptions that limit your ability to create mutually satisfactory arrangements for your kids. Read the article and maybe even share it with your ex.

The holiday season is stressful enough even for people who are not fighting. The rush to buy gifts we can't afford, prepare special meals for an army of relatives and friends, too many social events all at once and juggling work and parenting tires everyone. The sooner you begin planning and the more flexible you are, the more satisfying the season will be for you and your children..

Best wishes for a Merry Christmas, a Happy Chanukah, and a peaceful New Year.

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