

Holidays Can Be Even More Stressful For Divorced Families

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

With all the media hype, the excitement of other children, the visual reminders, and casual comments, children of divorce can find themselves remembering their family when it was intact, and grieve for the loss of that family.

They are challenged even more to deal with the changes in their families as they are whisked from one parental home to another, then to different sets of grandparents' houses. Other kids may experience the holidays with a lone parent, without any contact from the other parent. They may also live in a blended family, with new step relatives to get to know and get used to.

Divorce is one of the biggest causes of poverty. Children growing up in relative affluence may discover that living with a single parent changes their lifestyles and may grieve the loss of economic comfort and stuff.

Of course, divorce can also have an opposite effect on the kids' holidays. Divorced parents and/or grandparents may be competing for loyalty from the children. Both sides of a child's family may be spending with wild abandon to compensate for the trauma of divorce or one side may be spending excessively to compensate for his/her guilt or lack of engagement. Grandparents on the non-custodial parent side may have had little opportunity to see their grandchildren and may be engaging in over the top spending to influence kids to want to spend time with them.

Kids can also get caught up in the emotional lives of others. Parents experiencing sadness over the divorce may be no fun to be around. Kids are sometimes the captive audience for the emotional drama played out between two divorcing adults. Kids can feel responsible for the feelings of one or both parents.

An added stress may be the meeting a new love interest of a parent during holidays. Kids may be spending time with a non-custodial parent and a new romantic partner or spouse, and thinking about the custodial parent, at home, alone, and dealing with the emotions involved with seeing an ex-spouse move on. Kids see and think about more than the visit from Santa during the holidays. They are continually processing the changes going on all about them.

Parents and significant other adults can assist children of divorce to cope with the changes in their families during the holidays by practicing inclusion. Significant adults in a child's life can make sure that children of divorce are invited to family and other events that they have previously been invited to. Adults can engage kids in conversation about their holiday expectations, their feelings, etc. If kids seem upset, encouraging them to talk about their feelings won't hurt them. When kids express anger toward a parent, just

listen and let them know that you understand how they feel. Don't try to fix it or talk them out of it. Don't "villainize" either parent.

Providing structure is also helpful. Kids need structure. The holidays are no exception. High stress calls for an emphasis on structure--not necessarily more rules, but adhering to normal routines and schedules. Many children act out when stressed or depressed. Adhering to normal routines assists them in feeling more in control of themselves and their lives. If a child is having more difficulty than usual getting along with others, you can engage child in a discussion about that without scolding or shaming. Make this discussion separate from the discussion you use to "correct" the problem when they are in trouble. Start the conversation in a neutral way, without making it about getting into trouble.

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If you are not the parent and have concerns about a child during the holidays, bring the matter up with the parent in a way that is non-accusatory, non-labeling, and in general, non-threatening. Be careful not to assume that the cause of a child's problems or discomfort comes from being divorced. All family members (including children) have additional stressors and challenges during the holidays, not just divorced kids. It takes most children some time after the holidays to unwind and get back into daily routines.

Watch your assumptions and judgements about divorce. Be realistic about what you have any level of control over. You cannot make a parent take care of his/her children the way you would like them to. You can, however, help provide a stable, predictable, and safe environment for the kids you care about. Be sensitive to the needs and emotional health of the parent as well. Thoughtful acts, such as babysitting for the custodial parent can help to reduce his/her holiday stress and assist him/her in being able to be the parent that s/he wants to be.

