



Kimberly King Books

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Holiday Stress Prevention: Keeping Children of Divorce in Good Spirits Amid the Complexities of Holidays

VIRGINIA BEACH, VA — Parental separation or divorce can be traumatic for children, even when it's the most reasonable solution. And navigating the waters can be just as difficult for the adults involved. **Add holiday obligations, expectations and a newly defined “togetherness” (or lack thereof) to the picture, and the ordinary stress resulting from divorce can quickly swell to levels that provoke anxiety and overwhelm for all.**

This is especially true for the kids, notes Kimberly King, author of the children's book *When Your Parents Divorce* (a kid-to-kid guide to dealing with divorce), as they're often more affected and conflicted by such things as changes in routines and feelings of split loyalty and unwarranted guilt, yet not as equipped to handle them as one would hope the adults are. Their feelings of loss can be heightened at the holidays amid the contrasting projection of others' excitement and expectations. For some children, this brew of emotional strife and external tension can evoke feelings of depression, physical ailment and/or the desire to avoid holiday festivities altogether.

“No good parent wants to impart stress, anxiety and ill will in the hearts and minds of the children, especially during the holiday season, which we expect to be a time of reunion, celebration, forgiveness, hope and good will,” King said. “But often the adults are still reeling from the newness or ongoing effects of a divorce or separation. They may be so busy tending to holiday-related tasks and events that they miss the signals that a child is suffering in silence and don't recognize the many opportunities they have to ameliorate stress-provoking situations and facilitate a sense of calm, predictability and even joy by way of some simple forethought and planning.”

King, an elementary-school teacher and mother of three, wrote *When Your Parents Divorce* from both personal experience and the perspective of a child-development professional and early-childhood educator. The 41-page story, illustrated by Julissa Mora, is told in the voice of young Kimmy, with whose experience other kids can easily identify, and includes a section for readers to journal their own experiences.

For parents and extended families, King offers the following tips for navigating the season amid the turbulence of divorce or separation. Why? Because “sometimes the most precious gift an adult can give a child for the holidays is a sense of emotional support and stability and the fond memories that spring from the fun, formative moments that such an environment encourages,” she said.

Tips for the holidays for newly separated or divorced families

1. Put down the anger and discontent for the holidays.
2. Thanksgiving: Try to preserve existing family traditions in spirit and be flexible and creative in holiday planning. If your custody agreement is somewhat flexible and you're making an effort to cooperate with your ex-spouse to put the needs of the children first, consider doing two Thanksgivings. For the non-custodial parent, plan to celebrate a week early. The holiday is about being thankful and enjoying family time, after all. You can still celebrate this together, over a wonderful turkey (or alternative) dinner, regardless of the calendar date. On Thanksgiving day, the custodial parent should facilitate a phone call to the other parent. Don't assume the kids will remember to call on their own; more often than not, they won't! Kids tend to forget about the other parent when they're wrapped up in holiday travel and catching up with cousins. There's nothing worse for the non-present parent than feeling forgotten on a special day, and the unnecessary guilt the kids might feel if they *did* forget can easily be prevented. The custodial parent should take photos of the kids and text or email them to the non-present parent.
3. Christmas, Hanukkah and winter holidays: These can be difficult holidays to divide, but maintaining some form of a tradition that will continue year after year can provide a sense of stability for children. Perhaps an annual plan such as this: The kids spend Christmas Eve and Christmas morning with Dad and Christmas day, dinner and New Year's Eve with Mom. Kids crave tradition.
4. Both parents need to demonstrate holiday spirit by helping kids make or buy small gifts for the other parent. It's important for the parents to model such thoughtfulness; kids feel guilty if they have nothing to share or give to a parent. Good, simple ideas include:
 - a. Kids' artwork or poetry: Take a day to have each child draw, paint or write something special for Mom or Dad and add simple frames.
 - b. Paint a piece of pottery for Mom or Dad. Coffee cups are great.
 - c. Make a free Shutterfly.com family website.
 - d. Give each child an allowance for selecting something special at the store.
 - e. Remember that it's the thought that counts!
5. Consider a tradition of joint gift-giving (gifts from both "Mom and Dad"). This comes in handy for big-ticket wish-list items. Parents can share the expense; everybody wins!
6. If you attempt a holiday together, be careful. Especially if the split is recent, heed the following:
 - a. Understand that emotions are still raw and kids are still adjusting to this huge life change.
 - b. Avoid alcohol, which can fuel hostile or depressive feelings.
 - c. Don't discuss difficult issues or topics with your ex, either in private or in front of the kids.
 - d. Agree to keep all discussions within a "non-confrontational sphere" to avoid arguments or disputes.
 - e. Be aware that sharing the holiday during a separation or divorce can add to the confusion and might lead kids down a path of false hopes about parents reuniting.
7. School party safe zone: Attend school functions and show your child support together. Married or not, it is always nice to have Mom and Dad at a school party. Both Mom and Dad can bring a baked good, and everyone can have fun.
8. Avoid speaking in a negative tone or manner about your ex. Especially during the holidays, avoid all conversations about your ex unless they are kind. Try to get in the holiday spirit by practicing some forgiveness and good will.
9. Show compassion. There's usually one parent who is not handling the divorce well. Kids may consider that parent the injured party. There is nothing wrong with showing your ex compassion and forgiveness during the holidays or any other time throughout the year. If you can't be married, at least you can be kind to one another.
10. Always avoid "parentification," especially during the holidays. Parentification is a form of role reversal, in which a child is inappropriately given the role of meeting the emotional needs of the parent. Don't confide in your child about the divorce or other life stressors as if they were a friend or other adult. Don't share with your child that you are depressed because Mommy left you. You have to put on a strong front and protect your children at all costs from any additional stress. Going through a divorce is hard. Get a

good therapist or talk to a good friend. Children should never be put in the middle of adult business and emotions.

11. Don't discuss financial issues with children. "I couldn't buy you that surf board this year, son, because I have to pay Mom alimony and I'm totally broke." Kids should not be privy to what a parent pays for child support, alimony or gifts. Such comments are a lame attempt at trying to make a child pick a side. This is called *parent alienation*.
12. Never participate in parent alienation! This is a group of behaviors that are damaging to children's mental and emotional well-being and can interfere with a child/parent relationship. It is also considered a form of child abuse in most states. These behaviors, whether verbal or non-verbal, cause a child to be mentally manipulated or to believe that a loving parent is the cause of all his or her problems. The following rules apply to all parents, stepparents and extended family:
 - a. Never speak an ill word about the other parent.
 - b. Don't speak to your lawyer on the phone in within earshot of your children.
 - c. Don't share with your child any of the details of your divorce. Even if you've been hurt, cheated on, lied to, abandoned, etc. Don't risk the chance that your child will develop ill will toward the other parent because of you. Kids need to be able to love both parents. Participating in this type of behavior can place the kids in the middle. It can cause a hatred of the other parent and ruin the potential for relationship growth and improvement.
13. Keep your divorce and any negative comments from a new spouse about your ex-spouse off your social-media pages. Kids can see way more than you suspect. Be the adults, not the children.

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*Kimberly King is a child-development professional, certified early-childhood educator and speaker. She holds a Bachelor of Science degree in early childhood development and family studies from University of Maine and a Master of Science degree in early childhood education. **She is the author of "I Said 'No!'," a best-selling children's book about sexual-abuse prevention, and "When Your Parents Divorce," a kid-to-kid guide to dealing with divorce**, illustrated by Julissa Mora. King lives with her family in the Coastal Virginia region and is available for media interviews.*

Learn more about author Kimberly King and her children's books at: www.kimberlykingbooks.com or www.bouldenpublishing.com

When Your Parents Divorce is available at: <http://www.amazon.com/Parents-Divorce-guide-dealing-divorce/dp/0615487831>