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Getting through holidays and a divorce

Thanksgiving has come and gone, and the holiday season is in full swing. Spending the holidays with loved ones during divorce provides much needed comfort. The people surrounding you are on “your side.”

This comfort can lend itself to poor parenting choices. Do not take the opportunity to talk poorly about your ex. Chances are your children are listening and watching. When they overhear you and your family talking badly about their other parent, they feel upset and uncomfortable. Often parents are unaware how their children feel.

There is no doubt it feels good to vent, to discuss how you have been wronged. Before doing so, consider how it will harm your children. It is never worth the temporary pleasure.

A child will feel out of place and protective of their other parent when one side of their family talks badly about the “other side.” Do not let that child be yours.

Tips for parents

Zach Williams of the Law Office of Zachary W. Williams shares two tips he provides his clients around the holidays:

1. Talk to your family about your expectations.

Remember that you cannot control everyone's behavior, but it will be helpful to set some general ground rules.

Always welcome the children in to the holiday home. Be aware that the children will not spend as much time with your side of the family as years pass. However, it is important to concentrate on the positive — you do get to

spend holiday time with them.

Stay positive. Stick to “I am so happy you are here with us today” instead of “It's such a bummer you can't be here tomorrow.” Children will already feel badly about seeing their cousins, grandparents, aunts and uncles for less time than normal. Focus on the quality, not the quantity, of time. That is what matters most.

Holidays are stressful for everyone. Children of divorce are bouncing around between families during the entire holiday season, while feeling the effects of constantly being separated from one parent.

Williams makes sure to remind clients that whatever adults are feeling, it is worse for children. Children have anxieties about what they will be missing at one family gathering when they go to another one. Do not magnify those anxieties by allowing your family, or yourself, to be negative about the holiday schedule.

Williams encourages clients to remind themselves and their families, it is the nature of divorce and the parenting schedule, not the children's allegiances, which dictate holiday parenting time.

2. Be cooperative when co-parenting.

The effects of the holiday season are harshest on children of divorce. Holidays come with mixed feelings about what family to spend time with, even when a parenting schedule is in place.

Williams urges parents to remain cooperative with one another during this time and

COLLABORATIVE CONCEPTS



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remember, “Every little comment gets magnified during the holidays.”

Those feelings will make children question the holiday schedule. Children will, more likely than not, tell one parent they do not want to spend holiday time with another parent because of this.

Instead of telling a child you understand those feelings, Williams implores parents to take a cooperative, co-parenting approach.

Holidays come with mixed feelings about what family to spend time with, even when a parenting schedule is in place.

For example, saying, “I know you don't want to go, and I understand” is disparaging to the other parent. Instead, say “Your mom (or dad) and I decided this is what is best for you, and this is how the holidays are going to

work.” Or some other variation with the same message.

It is comforting to children to know their parents are on the same page, especially when it comes to decisions about them. Fake it till you make it.

Tips for attorneys

The holidays are a tricky time for families going through divorce. Parents do not see their children as often as they had in the past and that can be immensely difficult. Clients may fear that their children are missing out on quality time with their aging grandparents.

Traditions that the family once had are no longer a part of holiday celebration. Instead, parents are shuttling their children around, trying to remain positive and ward off loneliness.

Emotions are high during the holidays.

Williams tries to keep these things in mind and suggests sending out a friendly letter to clients before the holidays, around October or November, to check in. Williams makes sure to ask two important questions:

1. Do you understand your holiday schedule?

2. Are there any concerns or issues that need to be worked out before your holiday parenting time begins?

Getting a handle on the schedule, questions and concerns before holiday chaos ensues will help put your clients much more at ease.

Wishing everyone a happy and healthy holiday season!

— *The author would like to acknowledge the substantial contributions to this column by law clerk Adeline Sulentic.*