

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 161, No. 236

Dealing with the holidays and divorce

The holiday season can be an amazing time to spend with friends and family but can also be a stressor for families undergoing a divorce.

If it is your first holiday season apart from your once significant other and children, it can feel like you are starting fresh and navigating entirely new waters.

If you have gone through the holiday season before and have an established holiday parenting plan in place, you still may find this time emotionally activating with last minute questions about your holiday parenting schedule.

Regardless of where you are in the process, gaining perspective on making the holiday season emotionally manageable will benefit you and your children in the long term. Your attorney can be a resource for you during this time as you embark on a series of holidays, which can be joyous.

Parenting plan: Communication and compromise

Even if you have not yet negotiated a final parenting plan, it is important to establish a holiday schedule for the season. As always, communication is essential. While you may be experiencing a breakdown in communication with the other parent, try to refocus your attention on keeping conflict low to normalize the holidays for the benefit of your children.

Brittany Lakin-Starr, a clinical psychologist at Advocate Illinois Masonic Medical Center behavioral health services, encourages those undergoing a divorce to “communicate during the holidays and to co-parent for the benefit of the children.”

“Holidays have expectations and with that comes stress, however, to minimize stress, it is necessary to have a solid plan — the earlier this can be done the

better,” Lakin-Starr explained.

Making a temporary holiday schedule with the other parent may be emotional. However, being flexible and compromising as needed during holiday parenting negotiations will lessen your stress level and benefit your children’s holiday experience.

It is likely that you will reach a least one impasse. You will likely want the children on the same day, and you do not feel comfortable sharing this day together. It is important to manage your expectations during this period. Lakin-Starr encourages individuals to accept that this process will be emotional since they are used to spending time together as a family.

If the children are not with you on the day you wish they were, make plans for yourself and look forward to the time you will have with your children. She urges parents to mix old and new traditions during this time.

“Just because you are not a family in the same way you once were, does not mean that everyone gets lost in the way you used to celebrate the holidays. Integrate the old traditions but know that it is OK to add a new tradition, too,” she said.

Even if the parenting schedule is not your ideal, avoid placing blame on the other parent.

Lakin-Starr encourages parents to discuss the parenting plan not only with the other parent but also with their children. She recognizes that communication may be strained but stresses that keeping conflict low is important in allowing children to transition through this new terrain with ease.

While having emotional conversations with the other

COLLABORATIVE CONCEPTS



**BETH
FAWVER
McCORMACK**

Beth Fawver McCormack is a partner at Beermann. She practices exclusively in family law matters and is a collaborative law fellow, mediator and child representative.

parent, work through these conversations keeping in mind that you have common ground — “You can always agree on how much you both love the children.”

When having this conversation with your younger children, it is important to thoroughly explain scheduling, be open to questions and stay positive. For older children, it is important to allow them to have a voice in the process and potentially contribute to the formulation of the holiday schedule.

Regardless of age, reiterate to your children your acceptance of the established holiday schedule and give them a space to feel excited. Even if the parenting schedule is not your ideal, avoid placing blame on the other parent. Children are easily persuaded. They should not feel torn or as though they need to pick sides during this time.

Gift giving

In general, give yourself time to accept that you need not be both parents at once. Attempting to be both father and mother to a child or attempting to be the “perfect” parent is setting an unrealistic and impossible standard for yourself.

Lakin-Starr pointed out the real possibility of utilizing gifts to

sway the children. Just remember that doing so does not harm the other parent — it harms your children.

Reframe this experience to appreciate what both you and the other parent bring to the table. Rather than striving to compete with one another, work to make this a joint process. Lakin-Starr encourages parents to “communicate in advance about the gifts so that perhaps children can make one list to be broken up between both parents.”

If you are capable of doing this, you allow the children to see both parents as the holiday heroes.

Managing the downtime

Without question, parents who do not have the children on a holiday may experience a wave of loneliness — particularly if it is for the first time. Lakin-Starr acknowledges that this time “is sad, and it is important to mourn the loss, but [believes] after loss comes new growth.”

She encourages individuals to reframe this experience as a “time for new adventures.” For first-timers, she emphasizes the importance of scheduling time with other family members and friends to be surrounded by support and resist the desire to mourn alone.

She encourages parents not to feel guilty about their emotions. If you unexpectedly feel relief and happiness, accept your emotional experience and breathe a sigh of relief that “all your feelings during this time are valid.”

Above all, keep your expectations of yourself realistic. The holiday season is hard for everyone and even harder for those trying on new family dynamics.

— *I would like to graciously acknowledge the support of our amazing law clerk, Missy Turk in writing this column throughout this year. Kudos for great work!*