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Divorcing parents should make holidays special time for children

The holidays can be an overwhelming time for families. Whether it is the pressure to finish holiday shopping, managing time to see extended family, making travel plans, attending parties, entertaining guests, budgeting expenses or completing any other necessary tasks before the end of the year, the holiday season can prove to be a demanding time.

An added challenge accompanies families with divorced, divorcing or separated parents. Old traditions are often abandoned and parents might have to sacrifice important time with their children, as they figure out a new way to celebrate the holiday season.

Nevertheless, the holidays can still be a wonderful and happy time for children. A parent can make it possible to keep the holiday season festive regardless of the family structure.

Helene Moses, a licensed clinical social worker for North Shore University Health System, recommends setting SMART goals that set up the family for success during intense times around the holidays.

SMART stands for specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, time-bound goals.

Your main goal in surviving the holidays should be your children's overall happiness and emotional stability. This should be your priority at all times during the year, but deserves extra attention during the holidays when there is even more stress.

Setting realistic expectations is crucial to achieving an emotionally balanced environment for your family. Do not allow yourself or your children to have unrealistic expectations for how, when and where the holidays will be spent.

It may not be possible to celebrate together with your ex or soon-to-be ex-spouse or partner. If that is the case, do not lead your children into thinking the holidays are going to be spent as a unified family.

On the other end of the spectrum, if you and your ex-spouse or partner get along really well and choose to spend celebratory time together, it is crucial to be careful and not give your children a false hope of reconciliation.

Being upfront with your children — and yourself — about what is going on is always crucial to helping them understand their reality. This will help avoid later confusion as well.

Managing expectations is a lot easier to accomplish when a schedule is in place. Having a solid plan well in advance of the holidays will help eliminate or ameliorate stress due to uncertainty.

Talk to your children ahead of time and prepare them for the specific schedule that will be followed for the holidays. This will help them know what to expect and make the holiday transitions smoother.

The children will be reading your body language and will be hanging on every word. To that end, showing them your excitement will be invaluable to their level of acceptance of whatever plan is implemented.

Making a good-faith effort to communicate and compromise is essential to creating a successful holiday schedule. This involves removing yourself from the situation

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and thinking about what is best for the children, even if it is not ideal for you.

It is crucial to abide by Moses' recommendation to set boundaries and limit contact with high conflict people around the holidays. If you know certain people or places are going to cause tensions to rise, don't allow yourself to cross those paths if at all possible, or limit

COLLABORATIVE CONCEPTS



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your time with them at a minimum.

Try to remain positive about whatever your situation may be and how the holidays are going to be spent. If you are able to spend the holidays with your children, be aware of how you're thoughts and actions may be affecting them. Another reminder, they are picking up on every move, including the slightest bit of negativity or anger whether you realize it or not. This could make the children feel guilty, which you would never wish upon them.

If you are unable to see your children on certain holidays, Natalie Winiarski, a licensed clinical social worker at North Shore University Health System, encourages people to seek supportive friends

holidays with your ex-spouse, try to plan something special to do with them together at home when they return," Winiarski suggested.

This is not to say competition with the other parent over who makes better plans or who gives more extravagant gifts. Simply value and make the most out of the time you are able to spend with your children.

Appreciate your children having another person in their lives who is willing to give them the care and attention they deserve.

Finally, do not forget to think about yourself and your overall well-being around the holidays. Spending the holidays away from your children can be an incredibly emotional and challenging time. The holidays will come and go much more smoothly if your physical and mental health are in check.

Studies have shown that doing good deeds for others can help reduce anxiety and improve your overall mental health. Try helping your children pick out a present for the other parent or doing something to help foster their relationship. If you are not ready for that challenge, try volunteering or doing a random act of kindness.

This behavior is not only beneficial to your mental health, but is important to the growth and development of your children. Parents and caregivers are role models for children through their intended actions as well as the examples they set in their everyday behaviors and attitudes too.

While being in a family with two homes can be challenging at times, it is no less possible to raise happy, healthy children around the holidays. The ways holidays are celebrated may be different than what they are used to, but it is very possible to create a "new normal" and have joyous holiday celebrations for many years to come.

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