

## CHRISTMAS TIME TIPS FOR SEPARATED FAMILIES

At this time of year there are more family conflicts and splits, often abrupt and volatile. It takes superhuman strength to not let it overflow onto the kids. When parents are angry and hurt they mistakenly take it out on the other parent. For kids this is the worst thing ever.

### **What can you do to support your kids through Christmas if the separation is fairly new?**

1. Talk to your kids and be honest about how they might be feeling e.g sad, confused, angry, scared and let them know that you are there for them. But don't 'translate' their feelings into your own feelings about the other parent.
2. The earlier you get on to making plans about presents, or time with each of you and your families over the Christmas/New Year period, the better. Don't expect it to go perfectly smoothly, you may have to work on this each year for many years to come which is OK. Ideally be gracious and sensitive with the other parent, agree to a 'truce', and involve an impartial third party if necessary.
3. Create some new /different Christmas 'rituals' so you and the kids feel empowered in this 'change' in your family setup. You can change the time, place, activities, try out new things each year.
4. Talk to your kids about Santa coming to both homes. Sometimes it can be easier to 'rework' Santa's contribution to be just a super duper Christmas stocking, and all other presents to be from Mum, Dad etc. That way if they get the same present at each house it is much easier to explain.
5. Kids can have a great Christmas without you spending a fortune. Don't get caught up comparing what your kids get as gifts, or what they do when with the other parent. It is ok to be honest with your kids about budgets but not to blame the other parent or defend yourself. Instead you might help gently explain to them that because many kids' toys aren't made to last, you'd rather give them an experience that will be forever in their hearts. Older kids are often happy if you contribute towards something expensive which they are saving up to buy.
6. Because kids have a very highly attuned 'radar' for inappropriate adult conversations, be courageous enough to explain to friends and family that your kids love both parents and you don't want anyone to talk negatively about any aspect of the kids' Christmas experiences or arrangements.
7. Don't 'involve' your kids by letting them see you upset after communicating with the other parent. Choose 3 'stress/anger' busters you will use [e.g take 10 deep breaths, walk outside, focus your attention on an object and count slowly to 20, sing / dance to your favourite song].

Cont over



8. If you aren't seeing your kids on Christmas Eve/Day take proactive steps to either join or set up an orphan's Christmas, or if it's preferable, just do something low key with a friend like a walk and coffee, picnic, home pamper session and DVD marathon, cook or bake, or volunteer. Reassure yourself that this is just one day and one Christmas and remind yourself it is OK for your kids to have a good time with their other parent.
9. If you are in a situation where you won't see your kids at all, see if you can think of a way to make it possible for them to 'share' with you – you could send them a stamped postcard and ask them to write to you about their Christmas, or top up their phone credit (or the other parent's) and ask them to phone you or send you a video message. Don't make it about how you feel though as this burdens them.

### **What can you do to support your kids through Christmas/School Holidays if you and your ex aren't communicating well**

1. Don't leave things until the last minute. If you think the other parent may spring something on you, then be the bigger person and communicate politely ASAP and ask if you can plan ahead this year. If the other parent is vague, use all your best communication skills to propose a 'framework' or 'tentative plan', to keep refining. Sometime the other parent responds better to this because it feels a little less pressured to not have to sign off on it all months beforehand.
2. Arguing about your proposal versus the other parent's proposal won't get you far, just madder! It may be well worth paying for a 1-2 hour session with an impartial third party (family counsellor or mediator) to assist you both in making arrangements, taking the heat and emotion out of things, and being willing to compromise for the kids' sake.  
\*Remember you can always revise a court-ordered agreement without returning to court as long as you both agree.
3. Remember that parents often feel sad and lonely if they aren't seeing the kids much at this time of year. Be sensitive rather than critical and harsh. See if you can factor in 'make-up' time. Talk to the other parent about a 'Festival of Christmas' and both tell the kids it is not about just one day/date but is going to be over a few days, even a week, so they can see different family and friends.
4. Have 'contingency' care plans in place over School Holidays if you think it is a good idea, rather than revert to blame or worry about how to manage time over the holidays. Even if you were still together, you may have had to rope in family, friends, school holiday activity programs, or take unpaid leave to cover the long summer school hols, so don't expect the other parent to 'slot in' to the gaps in your Dec-Jan availability just because 'she/he is the children's parent and should do so'.

Please [email us](#) or post on our [facebook page](#) about what you are doing for your kids and yourself to make Christmas do-able and enjoyable.

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