

Thinking about holidays and other special occasions

We often think about Christmas and other, similar, festivals as being a time for family. But, for families that are separated, it can be a time of increased pressure and unhappiness. We've put together a list of things that you may want to think about in order to make the holidays a little easier for everyone.

Things that help...

- **If your children will spend time with both of you**

Try to agree, as early as possible, how your children will spend time with each of you. It isn't important that they spend exactly the same amount of time with you both. What's important is that the time is as relaxed and enjoyable as possible. Think about how it may be possible for your children to spend some quality time with both of you that allows everyone to get something of what they would like.

- **Make any hand-over as easy as possible**

If your children will be spending time in two places, make sure that the transition is as simple as possible. The last thing your children want is to see their mum and dad arguing. Agree when, where and how your children will move between you. Stick to your agreement and contact each other if there do need to be any changes. If seeing each other is too difficult, think about people who may be able to help at hand-over such as grandparents or friends.

- **When time with both of you isn't possible**

If it is not possible for your children to spend time with both of you on the day, try to think about ways that you can share the celebration with your children at another time and make that as special as possible. A phone call on, or a special letter for the day can help children feel connected and reduce any anxiety. If your children's other parent doesn't seem interested, might it be possible to encourage them just to send a card?

- **Don't compete over presents**

Some separated parents find it possible to share present buying and giving. However, for many, this isn't realistic. If you are buying presents separately, try to agree who will buy what. It can be very difficult if one parent has more money than the other. So try not to compete over who will buy the biggest or the best present – it just isn't in your children's best interests.

- **Think about extended family**

Try to make time for grandparents, aunts and uncles if your children are used to seeing them at Christmas. If it is too difficult to spend time with them, then a phone call will help everyone stay in touch.

- **Think about new partners and other children**

If there is a new partner in your life, think about how that will affect your arrangements. How will your children feel about that? How will your new partner feel about it? How will your children's other parent feel about it? What about step-siblings and half-siblings? Try to find a way forward that means that as little friction as possible. But be honest about what you want, too.

- **Don't require your children to make the decisions**

It is important that children, especially younger ones, are not required to make decisions on your behalf. Talk to all the adults involved, talk to your children if they are old enough, decide what is best and then tell your children what has been decided.

- **When you are unable to see or contact your children**

Being prevented from seeing or contacting your children, for whatever reason, is usually a very painful experience. Times of celebration can be especially difficult. Many parents in this position find their own way of marking the occasion. It can be helpful to try and make contact with other parents in a similar position as a way of offering and receiving support.

If you are unable to buy your child a present or show them that you are thinking about them, you may wish to consider buying a different kind of gift. Trees for Life [treesforlife.org.uk] offer a Tree Dedication pack – a native tree will be carefully planted for you as part of the restored Caledonian Forest. The tree will be protected for its lifetime, so that it grows to maturity in the forest, creating a vital habitat for wildlife. You will receive a certificate as a lasting reminder of your gift.

- **Look after yourself**

Christmas for separated families can be an emotionally difficult time. Not only for children, but for parents as well. This may be your first Christmas without your children or without your husband, wife or partner. Take some time to think about how you might feel and then think about ways of coping. If old traditions are too painful, create some new ones. If you won't have chance to see your children, write a letter and raise a toast to them. If you are going to be on your own, with or without your children, think about whether you might spend some time with friends or relatives.

Although this article refers specifically to Christmas, the advice applies to many other special occasions such as Hanukkah, Diwali, Eid al-Adha or a birthday.