



After the Break – Christmas after separation or divorce

If you are separated or divorced, you will already have experienced loss.

All stepfamilies are born of loss and change. Sometimes the changes are positive and embraced by all, but often, there are mixed feelings at the start of building a new family.

Christmas becomes particularly complicated for stepfamilies. The immediate family has the potential for four parents, eight grandparents and numerous children, sometimes of different ages and with differing needs.

Joint parenting following divorce and separation is the key to your children's emotional and mental health. This is often hard to manage, especially if the decision to part was not shared. Our society sets Christmas up as a wonderful family time, and expectations are high. How best to navigate the complexities of the season of goodwill when goodwill may be superficial or absent? Christmas is often a time when frustrations and unfinished business surface. Much depends on the age of the children concerned, but surprisingly, even adolescent and adult children can struggle. So how can you best manage the situation? Here are some tips:

- Start planning early. What do the children want? Are they able to make their views heard without fear of upsetting the adults involved? Children often take responsibility for one parent and learn early on to hide their own feelings while being watchful of adult reactions.
 - Conversations about planning at a mutually agreed time or via email can work well, and give everybody the time and opportunity to offer a measured response.
1. Use open and curious language. For example, consider the difference between, "It's my turn. You had them last year!" and "I wonder if it would be OK with you if I see the children on Christmas Eve. I think we'd all enjoy it and they would feel as if I'd been part of their Christmas."
 2. Keep children central to the conversation.
 3. Be open to negotiation and compromise.
 4. A very simple suggestion – be nice!
- Let the children know that you will be fine when they are with the other parent and demonstrate your ability to manage by making your own plans. This will help them to leave you and come back without worry or guilt.
 - Think about your children looking back on this time as adults. What would you like them to say about how you managed this difficult situation?

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