

Tis the Season to Share the Children ***The Holiday Guide to Co-Parenting***

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Having grown up as a child of divorce and now as a single mother, I know first hand how complicated and chaotic the holidays can be with children that live between two homes. There's splitting holidays at 6:00 p.m. on Christmas Eve; the expectations of trying to give their child the best holiday experience, and trying to find personal joy in the process. I understand the emotional turmoil that can come from the expectation of creating the "perfect Christmas."

We all want the best for our children and we treasure the memories; however, when children are being co-parented between multiple households, we must get practical and realistic with the overall process, for the sake of the children, but also for the stability of the parent.

What I've come to realize is that what matters most for Angelia is that she is loved and secure 365 days a year – that's the most important foundation I can give her, not a Christmas full of toys and gifts or a New Year's trip to New York. It's that on-going stability that will give her a foundation to build her healthy life. This truth has become the filter for every decision I make related to her life.

With that in mind, here are some ideas for making this shared Christmas bright for your children:

- Your children need both Mommy and Daddy to confirm they are loved and secure in both homes, year round.
- Allow your children to share with you the joy of being in their other home. Affirm their joy with your own healthy response. Your children's hearts will be whole when your response is affirming.
- Create a photo collage of your child with their other parent and give it to them as a gift this year. Encourage your child to hang it in their room at your house.
- Purchase a large corkboard and encourage your child to put special tokens and mementos of their other parent and their family on the board (grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, stepmother, stepsiblings, etc.) as a way to celebrate their other family.
- Bake a "Happy Birthday Jesus" cake with your children and read the Christmas story together. Bake a second cake and deliver it to another single parent family as a gift from your family.

And if this is going to be a holiday without the kids, especially the first Christmas the children are away:

- Invite a friend to be with you at your home as your children leave or to ride along with you as you drop them off. Be kind to yourself by acknowledging the initial pain that you may feel, but plan ahead to care for yourself and create an extra-fun experience for everyone instead of an emotional train wreck.
- No matter what you feel inside, release your children to go with their other parent and encourage them (with specific happy words) to have fun! If your children know you're OK then they will be OK! Each year this will get easier!
- Make plans with friends or family – don't sulk at home alone!

- Plan time with another single parent – see a movie or get ice cream!
- Volunteer at a local soup kitchen or homeless shelter and give to others in need.
- Remember, God’s comfort is close - he has promised us that he will never leave or forsake us. He is with you at all times!

Life after divorce is a process. With each step, it gets easier. Give yourself permission to re-frame and re-define your expectations as a parent and as a woman! Find joy in the journey.

Be strong for your children. Be intentional for yourself. Decide this year will be your best year yet in pre-planning for the complications of the holidays!

Please see the “store” for audio products related to this, and other, critical topics.

A companion in the process,

Tammy G. Bennett