

Tips for Blended Families Over The Holidays

- Be Understanding & Validate Emotions: While the holidays can be memorable and fun, it's important to expect a mixture of emotion with blended families. New relationships take time to develop and in the beginning, questions that often sit under the surface are "Where's my place?" "Am I still valued or loved?" "Where do I belong?" New families coming together may take years to develop into more natural routines & traditions through the holidays. Holidays can be a painful reminder that things are not what they used to be. Be patient. Each person in the picture will blend in the family in different ways & at different paces. Be understanding that there is a mixture of emotions and that having sadness, hurt or even anger is *normal*, rather than a sign that something is wrong. You may want to ask in advance, especially if the blended family is in their first year or two together, "What do you think might be the hardest part for you this holiday?" Listen and then ask what they might need to help with that hard part. Validate emotions. Say things like "I can see why you'd feel that way." "I would probably feel that way too in your shoes" or "That makes sense that you'd feel sad."
- Plan ahead & Communicate. Work out the logistical details in advance of where & what plans will happen with each parent's house, how transportation will happen. Include your kids' input as much as possible. While you & your spouse chose to be together, your kids didn't necessarily have that same kind of choice about being together with the new family, so allowing them choices empowers them. Work out the plans with your ex and then stick to the plan. Last minute changes may leave the kids in uncomfortable tensions between parents who are late dropping off the kids or calling for a last minute change. The newer & more uncertain the relationships, the more planning & communication necessary.
- Look for "Win-Wins" in the Traditions. Traditions carry a lot of meaning for people. Ask, in advance, each person involved in the family gathering, "What would be meaningful to you during this holiday?" "What would be your favorite foods & activities that mean the most to you?" Some families have had 5 kinds of pie, so everyone had their favorite. Others have put a string of white lights on the Christmas tree as well as a string of colored lights, allowing for the option to plug in either strand by itself to accommodate different wishes for the look on the tree. If there are too many wishes to blend together in one holiday, perhaps you agree that this year you'll do it one way & the following year you'll do it another way.

If disagreements happen that you didn't expect, choose your battles and avoid power struggles. Remember, that the relationships are the most important part, rather than the details.

- Forming New Traditions: If your kids have adjusted to family changes over the holidays, ask them what ideas they would have to start new traditions together. Be sensitive to timing – they may or may not be open yet to doing something new all together as a family. You may have each kid choose a new tradition to do together. Traditions often include:

Favorite Foods - Prepared by special people, in special ways at special times
Favorite Activities – Seasonal outdoor activities, board games, special holiday movies, readings, singing, sporting events, theater or holiday music productions. Fun & laughter create bonds in relationships. Also, may include spiritual/religious ceremonies

Favorite Decorations – Meaningful decorations, whether home-made or bought can be fun to do together. Remember that having fun & expression is more important than whether the decorations look perfect.

- Don't take it personally if your kids want to spend a little more time at the other parent's home; or if they don't want to engage in all of the plans you'd like to do; or if things don't go as smoothly as you had hoped.
- Be Equitable. Kids often compare with other kids in the mix and will size up how much you may have spent on them vs. the others. If the holiday involves exchanging gifts, spend the same amount of money and/or have the same amount of gifts for each. In addition, avoid trying to make up for difficult emotions by buying them things. Better to talk about those emotions rather than smooth over with gifts.
- Lighten Up: The holidays would be a time to relax some of the normal rules in the house. Communicate this flexibility of rules in advance regarding bedtimes, meal times, etc. Go with the flow a little more & allow each some down time or flexibility to take care of their own needs for connection vs. space. Avoid over-scheduling. Remember that whatever plans you have for your family in your home, kids in blended families have another set of plans at the other parents home. They need their relax time as well. Keep a sense of humor & relaxed attitude rather than expecting things to go a certain way.
- Lay Aside Conflicts With Your Ex: The holidays are a good time to lay aside differences or resentments with your ex and focus on making special memories for your kids. The holidays are not the time for your kids to bear the tension of conflict between the two of you. Talk well of the other parent in the presence of your children and avoid any bad-mouthing of them or subtle jabs. If your relationship with your ex is congenial, perhaps an activity is planned where they are included.