



Planning Ahead Helps Blended Families Handle the Holidays

When a family has changed due to divorce, death or other complications, the holiday season can bring on a tangled web of emotions, says Cheryl Clark, an Iowa State University Extension family life field specialist.

However, planning ahead and confronting feelings about family rituals and traditions can prevent misunderstanding and build more healthy relationships among family members, Clark said.

“Today’s families are a real blending of relationships, and no family is exempt. Every family has an important role in preparing for meaningful holiday celebrations,” Clark said. “To accomplish this goal, plan purposefully, prepare politely, proceed peacefully and pursue positively!”

Clark offers 10 tips for advance planning and opening up conversation about holiday celebrations for those who are co-parenting or who are in blended families.

1. Set a limit on gift giving that everyone can afford. Perhaps draw names to exchange gifts, give a gift of service to a worthy cause in the name of a family member instead of exchanging gifts or have a card shower and forego gift giving completely. Holiday celebrations can be less complicated and lower in emotional intensity when the emphasis is not placed on exchanging material gifts. Don’t try to buy a child’s love and loyalty with expensive gifts.
2. Find out how your children feel, well in advance of the upcoming holiday. Giving children a voice in the planning often opens up solutions to situations that adults may miss. Listening to children’s fears, complaints and suggestions helps them obtain a new sense of belonging and connectedness in the entire family circle.
3. Relocate a traditional family dinner to a neutral location or have a buffet rather than a formal sit-down meal. The increased flexibility of a buffet may help conversations among family members who haven’t seen each other in a long time or have different relationships than they used to have.
4. Schedule several versions of family pictures, rather than one whole family portrait. Better yet, stick to informal pictures of family members involved in the activities of the day.

5. “Work out your angry feelings *before* the holiday celebrations begin, rather than ‘faking it’ around the children,” Clark said. Minimize the time spent together when relationships are more fragile. Consciously planning for family celebrations can mean scheduling more physical activity and stress reduction so that adults are emotionally ready to be more flexible, friendly and understanding of everyone’s needs.

6. Recognize and learn to accept the fact that milestone events become more complicated in complex families. Consult the prime planners in the family to offer clues in planning celebrations that will be sensitive to everyone’s feelings and memorable in the positive sense of the word.

7. It may be important to maintain a few favorite old family traditions that everyone can agree on. Clark added, “Purposefully creating some new rituals that celebrate your new family form can bring a sense of positive excitement to holiday planning.”

8. “Feelings of loss may be magnified during the holidays,” Clark said. “You can ease family expectations of what a holiday is *supposed* to be like by learning healthy ways to cope with difficult feelings and understanding that other family members may have similar feelings. There is no perfect family.”

9. Provide a balance between holiday fun and family responsibilities. Discuss rules and discipline for holiday celebrations *before* the holiday approaches.

“Be consistent with your own ‘house rules,’ and be prepared to repeat them after your children visit your co-parent,” Clark said. “Help make the transition from one home to the other smooth and calm. Visitation schedules may need to change or flex during the holidays to accommodate everyone’s needs. Remaining respectful and flexible is more appreciated and more helpful to the children and adults alike.”

10. Assure your family members that they are loved and appreciated for themselves. Discuss differences between homes respectfully, and encourage constructive communication rather than destructive comparing of family life. Children need to know that it is good to love both parents and all family members, even though everyone is different.

For more information on parenting at a distance, visit www.daads.com. Also, contact your ISU Extension county office to order “Divorce Matters” publications (PM 1637 and PM 1641) for additional help.