

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Seasonal Solutions for Modern Families (Single, Blended or Step)

For many, the dream of a perfect holiday season filled with love, laughter, and harmony is just that: a dream. The pressure to buy the perfect gift, cook like a celebrity chef, entertain kids and bask in the festive fervour of the holidays can overwhelm even the most pristine parents. So when other modern family complexities are added to the mix—whether it be the blending of families or coping with the season as a single parent—it's not surprising that the extra stress of these situations leads to seasonal chaos.

Below are some common scenarios and solutions that can help you and your family eliminate holiday bickering and sneers, and re-focus your energy on festive cheer.

Forging New Family Dynamics

For kids, dealing with separation, divorce and new partners can be challenging at the best of times. But during the holidays, when gifts, gatherings and "longstanding" family traditions come into play, a tug-of-war can ensue: between ex-partners, old ways and the new family dynamic. Avoid an oil and water scenario, and mix with ease by:

Planning in advance. Steer clear of last-minute spats with ex-spouses about where children will spend holidays by discussing it well in advance. Be fair in the negotiations and alternate years when kids spend the actual holiday with you and your ex-spouse. On years where you're "off," re-schedule celebrations on another day before or after the actual holiday. Ask kids for a wish list of gifts and work together with your ex-spouse to determine who will buy what.

Not buying happiness. Showering kids with presents to "make up for" separation from a parent or guardian is a superficial fix to deeper issues. Support, nurturing and quality time are the greatest gifts you can give kids and the ones they're likely to cherish over time.

Staying sweet about your ex. Bad-mouthing your ex-partner in front of your child is never in season. It not only confuses kids' already conflicted loyalties, but adds further stress at a time hyped as the most fun of the year. Don't use your child as a messenger to vent your frustrations about holiday schedules or other disagreements. While you may feel aggravation about your ex-mate, he or she is still an important part of your child's life.

Asking for ideas. From baking cookies to ice skating, involve children and step-children in planning activities for the holiday that everyone can participate in. Letting kids have a say in seasonal events gives them a sense of empowerment and can help everyone adjust to the new situation.

Celebrating something old and something new. Instead of trying to replicate holidays of the past, why not work on celebrating the new family dynamic? Get children to select their favorite holiday tradition they'd like to keep and together come up with some special new traditions you can all enjoy as a family.

Being realistic. The old saying, "you can pick your friends, but not your family" holds even more weight for children in blended families. Expecting you and your new partner's children to become best of friends over the holiday season, not only pressures the kids, but can actually have the reverse effect. Encourage mutual respect and understanding instead of forcing friendships.

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Blending well. Whether it's time, gifts or your attention, in newly-blended families it's important that you and your partner make an effort to treat each other's kids fairly and equally. Many children fear there won't be enough space for them in the new family, so it's vital your actions demonstrate that there's plenty of room for everyone.

Seasonal Solace: When the Kids are Away

While the holidays may not be the same when the kids are off celebrating at your ex-partner's home, it can also be a great chance to clock some "me" (if you're a single parent) or "we" (if you're in a relationship) time. Be sure to:

Encourage your children to have fun. Kids of separated parents often feel torn about enjoying themselves because they instinctively feel they're "betraying" the other parent. Ease this anxiety by giving them "permission" to have a good time before they leave.

Pamper yourself. Taking time out for you, especially if you have primary custody, can help you relax and recharge. Sleep in, take a bath, get a massage or meet a friend for a movie.

Host a dinner party. If you're blue about missing out on the big holiday meal, why not gather up some friends or neighbors for a seasonal feast? Ease some of the culinary stress by making it a potluck.

Go to a service. If a religious ceremony is part of your family's tradition, then don't miss out: invite a friend or offer to accompany an older relative and go.

Get organized. Clean out closets, put photos into albums and reply to friends' e-mails.

Call your children. While you don't want to interfere with their holiday fun, it's also important to let kids know you're thinking of them and miss them. Ask them about gifts and activities they're doing with genuine interest. Don't call to "spy" on your ex or to make kids feel guilty about not being with you. Keep it upbeat, quick and focused on your children.

Whatever your family dynamic, it's vital that you go easy on yourself and accept less than holiday perfection. The more emphasis you put on making everything "just right," the more likely things are to go wrong. Create a plan to manage logistics and expectations, practice patience and be prepared for mishaps along the way. Doing so will help keep the lines of communication open, help establish new family traditions and help everyone re-discover the comfort and joy of the season.