

Family mediation charity reveals how separated parents can survive Christmas

Wednesday 10 December, 2014

Christmas should be a magical time of year for families, a chance to come together, open presents and have fun. For families who have gone through the turmoil of a divorce it can mean heightened emotions and stress as they try to do what's best for their children despite their separation. What starts out as good intentions can often leave children in the middle of a bitter tug of war.

So how can you ensure that you spend meaningful time with your kids over Christmas even if they don't live with you any more?

Stuart Valentine, Chief Executive of family mediation charity Relationships Scotland, has some straightforward advice for separated couple who want to make sure Christmas is still special for their children.

"It's hard for families who have enjoyed a special, magical time for years to suddenly be hit with the reality of a Christmas apart.

In my experience, the biggest issue is that every child wants mum and dad together for Christmas.

And it's very traumatic for children to spend Christmas day away from one parent. They get very worried about that parent and feel very guilty.

And the problem, in high-conflict situations, is that each parent is adamant that the children will spend Christmas with them."

Thankfully there's some simple steps you can take to make sure Christmas contact goes smoothly:

Tell the children

While this might seem obvious, lots of separated parents avoid telling their Children how Christmas will be different this year until it's too late. Don't leave it until Christmas Eve. If they're old enough, take this opportunity to ask your children how they'd like to spend Christmas with each parent.

Good communication with your ex-partner is vital

It's not just about Christmas day, the festive period can involve a lot of events, religious ceremonies and school activities. In mediation we try and get the parents to agree how far in advance they should communicate with each other so that if there is a clash of events a compromise can be reached. If your child is in the school's nativity play and you don't tell your ex-partner until the day before that's going to lead to conflict.

Break the Christmas period up

Focusing purely on Christmas day can be counter-productive. One parent having the children for contact on Christmas Eve and Boxing Day while the other parent has contact on Christmas day can work well. Alternatively break up the big day itself - one parent has contact with the children in the morning of Christmas Day and the other parent has contact in the afternoon. Parents can rotate this yearly to ensure nobody feels left out. I'd advise that you only spend Christmas day together if you have an incredibly good relationship with your ex-partner.

With some forward planning and good communication Christmas can still be a hugely enjoyable and magical time for separated families.

You can find out more about the work of Relationships Scotland at www.relationships-scotland.org.uk

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