



## **Holiday Planning**

### *For Blended Households*

Whose turn is it to have the kids for Thanksgiving? Do I need to plan dinner for afternoon or evening? Will the kids want to eat when they come? Will we have to leave early to get them? Will we get them back in time to enjoy our holiday?"

For blended families, these questions are all too familiar. While we look forward to Thanksgiving and Christmas as being an opportunity to spend good times with our families creating happy memories, coordinating an overcrowded schedule around visitation and other blended family factors can be a challenge. It is possible, though, with just a little common sense, flexibility, and foresight. Making the most of times shared with our kids and creating happy memories should be at the top of the priority list, and the best way to do this is to keep a cool head and a warm heart.

I really enjoy this blessed season. I love things like crisp weather, festive decorations, school plays, church programs, the aroma of home baked goodies, and noisy family gatherings. But it's also one of the most stressful times of the year.

Visitation agreements can affect everything from school plays and church programs to the hour we serve turkey or open gifts. Last-minute changes, late arrivals, duplicated gifts, or preparing a great dinner for a child who has already eaten tend to snuff out the joyful holiday spirit. The key to pulling off a pleasant and memorable holiday season is in maintaining a good attitude while expecting the unexpected.

**Include these steps in your holiday preparations so you can enjoy the most wonderful time of the year with your family.**



1. Confirm your holiday visitation dates early. This might seem obvious, but take it from someone who has a very short memory. It's easy to get mixed up from one year to the next.

Find out what days the children will be arriving and leaving so you can plan for programs, dinners, and other celebrations. If you've made all your plans around Christmas Eve and the children don't arrive until Christmas morning, the kids miss out and the miscommunication will cause conflicts. These avoidable altercations also take the joy and fun out of the holiday.

2. Coordinate your plans with the children and your ex-spouse. Find out what the other household is doing before you make your final plans. Some ex-spouses will work with you on everything, right down to coordinating gifts to avoid duplicate presents.

When there are strained relationships with an ex-spouse, of course, coordinating even the simplest thing can be very stressful. In this case, take the dates and times you are sure of and work within them. Accept that you won't please everyone, but start early and leave room for changes.

3. Keep everyone informed. If you're the custodial parent, inform your ex of any programs or events so they will have an option to attend. If you don't have custody, call the school or church to find out the date and time. If an event is special to you, speak up early. No one can plan around something they don't know about. Be specific and compromise.

4. Be Flexible. Think about what will stick in your children's minds when they think about the holidays 10 years from now? Will they recall arguments and anger between their parents? Or will they smile at thoughts of fun family gatherings?



Over the years, our family has opened gifts on Christmas Eve, Christmas morning and even the day after Christmas. We have eaten our Thanksgiving dinner at noon, 2 p.m., 5 p.m., and 7 p.m. Sometimes the whole family has been seated around the table. Other times, we were a few heads short. Our children arrived with empty tummies one year and full the next.

My husband and I have to remind ourselves that it's more important to be flexible than to allow changes or difficult personalities to ruin our holidays. Children don't remember the dates and hours of our celebrations. They remember the warm and happy times you shared as a family.

5. Visitation Attitudes. Most teens come home from their other parent's household with a bad attitude. Transitioning between households is difficult because they have to move from one set of rules, values, and personalities to another. Saying goodbye to one parent while saying hello to the other brings several emotions crashing to the surface at the same time.

I call this "the permanent wave."

Allowing an adjustment period and extending a bit of grace during transitional times will make for a more pleasant holiday?the longer the visitation, the longer the adjustment period. If your child has only been gone for a weekend, a day or so of grace should be enough time to get reacclimated. But if they have spent weeks, or they live with the other parent, it usually takes more time to adjust.

Romans 12:17-18 says, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Try to do what is honorable in everyone's eyes. If possible, on your part, live at peace with everyone." Even in Christian homes, it can be difficult to get past those hard emotional issues and apply the Word of God to every situation.



From our years of blending, my husband and I learned the most important things to remember are the reason for the celebration and how our attitudes and stress levels affect the kids. Children pick up on what you feel. If you feel relaxed, unhurried, and calm, your kids will feel the same. If you are stressed and ill tempered, they will be too. If your kids see you compromise and adjust to a less than ideal situation with grace and generosity, they will learn how to do the same. You set the tone for your household?good or bad. We actually have a choice about how we respond to the stresses and conflicts of planning for the holidays.

Once our children reach adolescence, we only have a few years before they are off to college or out on their own. The last thing we want to do is leave such a bad taste in their mouths that they find reasons to celebrate elsewhere. We need to make the best of these times so our kids will want to come home for the holidays.