

Unwrapping Step-Christmas

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In an ideal world, holidays would bring families closer together. There would be a focus on peace, joy and love. Parents, stepparents, former spouses, children and stepchildren, grandparents and step-grandparents would embrace each other in perfect harmony, and family discord would disappear, at least until the New Year. Unfortunately, this isn't an ideal world.

A case in point is Joanne (not her real name). Joanne finds holidays with her husband's family especially stressful and unfulfilling, particularly because of their insistence on including her husband's former spouse in all the festivities. Joanne feels extremely uncomfortable and out of place at these events. She recently quipped that she had "vomited" her way from Thanksgiving to New Year's! Not exactly the most pleasant holiday image.

I suspect that many of us can relate to Joanne. For her, the holidays are filled with anger, stress and feeling like an "outsider" (a rather common phenomenon in stepfamilies). How does the average stepfamily or single parent experience the holidays? Is it a time of renewal and joy or a time of stress, frustration, guilt, and perhaps even sadness? To answer this question I decided to do some "informal" research and ask a few single parents and stepfamily members what Christmas meant to them and how they coped with the holidays.

I learned that there were unique circumstances in stepfamilies and single parent homes that made the holidays more hectic and stressful.

The biggest issue was the children, specifically, how they would be "shared" by parents no longer living together. Questions ranged from which parent would have them Christmas morning and for how long, to who would pay for them to travel out of town (and for how long). Some of the arrangements were mind-boggling. They involved precise time allotments so that no one felt cheated, or in some cases, pretty complicated out-of-town travel arrangements. In one family, everything is on hold this year waiting for a plane ticket to arrive, apparently since it had never arrived at all last year.

Grief and loneliness were issues for a number of parents. Many of them had to deal with the reality of not having their children around for the holidays. For some, this meant spending the holidays alone. Children seemed conflicted too—caught between the excitement of seeing an absent parent, and the sadness of leaving the other. When asked how they coped, parents mentioned churches or organizations that had holiday dinners or celebrations. Getting connected was a common theme.

Another huge issue was finances. Single moms spoke of tight budgets and little help from former spouses or family members. Many of the stepfamilies I

interviewed were already on “holiday financial overload” due to an explosion in the number of people in the “family.” The irony of the holidays is that a blessed time of the year often creates the most conflict. Stresses mount as families attempt to stretch an already tight budget or decide whom (and who not) to buy gifts for. Parents argue over differing traditions and spending limits. Children gripe about having to buy presents for other siblings (or stepparents) that they barely know, and may not even like. Many families solved the problem by drawing names and using price limits. Some set a budget for all Christmas spending (a great idea incidentally). Most families emphasized a need for fairness—not favoring one group over another. If money is tight, make a budget, build relationships rather than concentrate on the purchase of holiday gifts, and focus on the meaning of the holidays. Forcing children to buy presents for people they don’t like or know is unwise.

Many families I talked to were still trying to re-create “perfect” holidays from their past. They had childhood or family memories of great times that they wanted to pass down to their children. Unfortunately, for most of these families, the realities of divorce and/or remarriage made re-creating these memories almost impossible. Joe and Nancy were planning their first Christmas together. They had recently remarried, each with three children. Christmas, in fact all holidays, were huge for Joe and his children. He loved the season and he had wonderful memories of tons of presents under a huge, well-decorated tree. Joe had no idea that Nancy’s images of Christmas were very different. Before long, planning turned into arguing as the two discovered just how different their expectations really were. “How can you mess up Christmas?” Joe asked rhetorically. “I never thought it would be this complicated.” According to them both, Joe and Nancy’s first Christmas together was a disaster. Eventually, they hammered out a way to celebrate the holidays that worked well enough for both of them.

One family talked about the frustration of trying to be fair to their seven children and stepchildren. Apparently the kids would count all the presents the night before to see who had more, which then caused conflict between the parents. The stepmom told me that last year they had to separate a pair of socks to make sure every child had the same number of gifts. Fairness can also be tough when parents, or grandparents, show favoritism. One parent lamented that her husband’s family did not recognize her children at Christmas; giving gifts only to her husband’s children.

Holidays can open up hidden or barely mended wounds and reveal bitterness and resentment that lies just under the surface. Ongoing silent battles between former spouses, for example, often become open battles as parents pressure children regarding how much time they will have together and how travel plans will be made. Loyalty conflicts, and issues of loss for children, can easily spoil the joy of the season if parents are not careful. Besides, how many Christmas dinners can one child actually eat?

Here is an example of a child who decided to take charge of his own situation. Johnnie, age 13, decided not to visit his out-of-town dad for Christmas this year. He said that the whole thing had just become too big a hassle. Months before the holidays, his parents would begin arguing over the trip—how long he would stay, who would pay, how would he get there—or get back. It became frustrating, confusing and hurtful. Besides, he wasn't too wild about his stepmother. "Why can't I just spend time with my Dad?" he asked. For him, the fun of the holidays was reduced to constant bickering between his parents and the prospect of visiting a dad with a new wife and stepdaughter. Needless to say, both parents blamed each other, but it was Johnnie who made the decision because he knew his parents could not. On a sidenote, the adjustment for children after a divorce is directly determined by the level of conflict between the biological parents; the lower the level, the better the adjustment.

For most stepfamilies, the holidays are a blend of excitement and frustration. Interestingly, only a few families that I interviewed had any sort of holiday plan, and even fewer thought to discuss the holidays in advance with their spouse, children or (dare I say) their former spouse. It seems evident that a lack of constructive planning or an unwillingness to discuss preferences with all parties involved inevitably leads to higher levels of frustration. If former spouses cannot talk to one another or if children's wishes are not considered, I suppose holidays will continue to be stressful.

All in all, I think stepfamily holidays are tough for many reasons; I will mention four of them.

First, holidays evoke painful memories, thoughts and feelings about things that were lost. Loss and grief are inescapable divorce and stepfamily realities. Holidays create strong emotions and a yearning for family. It is against this backdrop that stepfamilies members must deal with the reality that things will never be the way they were. This seems to be an area of struggle for both adults and children.

Second, holidays reveal the fragile, tentative nature of post-divorce relationships. These times confront former and current spouses, children and relatives with the dilemma of trying to "be a family together" despite significant distrust, dislike, disrespect, resentments, and disinterest. "Who is in our family?" was a question a seven year old stepchild asked me. Her question suggested that for many stepfamilies, family identity is a source of conflict and pain. Some stepchildren (and stepparents) report feeling like they don't fit in anywhere.

The third reason holidays can be tough is that they expose a common stepfamily problem—unrealistic expectations. Couples remarry with very different pictures of how the family "should" look and function (remember Joe and Nancy). "Different" in stepfamilies is always translated as "wrong" and inevitably leads to conflict. Confusion and conflict over varying customs and traditions, unclear rules and

roles, family values, and family loyalties can make planning and enjoying holidays extremely difficult, unless adults are proactive about reducing the stressors.

The final reason holidays are tough is finances. Financial stress is a reality in most homes, stepfamily or not. In stepfamilies, holidays push an already fragile system to its limit. Families that cannot set limits or boundaries or solve problems effectively particularly struggle during the holiday. Trying to ease pain or guilt or remedy child issues via spending will not work and will take you and your family away from the true meaning of the holidays.

The Most Wonderful Time of the Year

Ultimately, letting go of control, learning to deal with disappointment and finding a way to balance everyone's needs and desires will lead to fulfilling holidays. My advice is to stay flexible, keep it simple and maintain your sense of humor. Focus on progress, not perfection. Find peace in the spirit of the holiday season.

Stepfamilies, and all families, have some powerful tools at their disposal during the holidays: respect, forgiveness, courtesy and thoughtfulness—if they exist, then perhaps many holiday problems will disappear. Things may never be like they were, but they can be new and fresh—which is, after all, the ultimate holiday message. Find a way to celebrate. Peace. *Dr. Jeff Parziale is the Director of InStep Ministries*