

Holiday Co-Parenting: Key Points for Families Navigating the Season

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Parenting through the holidays can be complicated. For families who are divorced or separated from the other parent of young children, co-parenting can become excessively difficult. The three key points to remember during this stressful time of year are preparation, communication, and child-focused decision-making.

None of us live in a Hallmark movie. The ending is not always a happy one. However, the more steps we can take to make this time of year go more smoothly, the better the experience for the children involved.

Early Planning

The holiday period involves school breaks, travel, and overlapping traditions. Because last-minute conflicts are difficult to resolve, it is always best to finalize schedules well in advance. Reviewing parenting plans early, especially provisions for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's, helps avoid misunderstandings. Don't make plans based on what you believe your holiday schedule is, verify same by reviewing your custody documents far in advance. Confirm your understanding with the other parent and put same in writing.

No one wants to have to go into Court on an emergent basis to determine which parent has the children Christmas morning. Moreover, given how inundated our judiciary is in New Jersey, urgent holiday disputes are often difficult to get before a Judge in time.

Communication

Communication is key to making sure the holidays are as stress free as possible. Often, it can be difficult to have a reasonable conversation with the other parent if there was a particularly ugly divorce or there are still hurt feelings between the parents related to the end of their relationship. However, the more bridges that you can build, centered on your children in common, the better it will be for everyone.

For example, issues such as holiday spending can create tension if parents do not communicate. Discussing budgets, major gifts, and expectations ahead of time helps prevent duplication and keeps children from feeling caught in the middle.

Flexibility and Child-Focused Decision Making

All parenting time plans can require adjustments for work schedules, extended family, or special events. Holiday plan adjustments can be especially stressful. However, a willingness to be flexible is important. This does not mean that you bend over backwards to accommodate a third

cousin once removed, but it does mean that you modify your schedule if there is an important event or person in the child's life that requires same.

In New Jersey, the courts value and normally find in favor of a parent that is acting reasonable and fair under the circumstances and ultimately, in the child's best interests. Flexibility is seen as responsible parenting and the entire family benefits from decisions centered on the best interest of the child.

When Do You Need To Speak To An Attorney?

It is always important to obtain legal advice to know your rights, what you are entitled to, what a court may do in any situation, and what options you have. Further, if communication breaks down with the other parent over travel, exchanges, or scheduling, speaking with a family-law attorney can provide clarity. Legal counsel can review the existing parenting plan, explain available options, and help determine whether mediation or another form of dispute resolution is appropriate.

Because holiday-related issues often arise at the same time for many families, it's important to address concerns promptly. The sooner parents seek guidance, the more options they typically have for resolving the matter efficiently and with minimal disruption to the holiday season.

Final Thought

The holiday months present challenges for many co-parents, but the guiding principles remain consistent: plan ahead, stay flexible, and prioritize the child's experience. Whether celebrating Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, New Year's, or another holiday, understanding your rights and preparing thoughtfully can help create a smoother and brighter season for the whole family.