

## Better Parenting: 7 Dos and Don'ts to Make Holidays Brighter for Divorced or Split Families

By Sonia Spackman MA, MFT

It seems kind of late for holiday planning, yet it is never too late to make happier memories.

For some kids whose parents are divorced or separated the holidays can be a nightmare.

Here are some ways we may help make the holidays better for our kids this year.

### 1. TAKE TIME AWAY IF YOU HAVE TO

**DON'T** allow yourself to be thrown together before you are ready. Time may be needed to get over hard feelings and differences. You may find it easier to be away and celebrate a second holiday after the holiday.

**DO** understand you are still a parent and taking care of the kids is your first priority. Maybe you can get help from a close relative or friend, that can help you get through the holidays so you will be able to celebrate with your children. As you work at it, you can create new traditions that will make the holidays enjoyable again.

### 2. FOCUS ON GIVING INSTEAD OF WINNING

**DON'T** get into conflicts over visitation schedules. Children look to their parents as role models. The holidays are not the time to bring up bad feelings or make rude statements, even if you are being pressured into reacting.

**DO** try to make positive statements to and about your ex-spouse. It will be a gift to your kids even if they don't get it while they are young. Your children will recognize your qualities

and what you do, as they get older. Here are some suggestions for now:

- Plan ahead far in advance with your ex-spouse and your kids if you can.
- Prioritize your wish list of activities with dates and times that are most important to you.

- Communicate your wants and needs without being pushy.

- Remain calm and respectful. Listen carefully to discover exactly what your ex really wants. You might be able to make trade offs.

- Put the schedule in writing as soon as you reach an agreement and give your ex a copy to mutually keep track of the schedule and prevent misunderstandings.

- Always have plan "B" Make an easy or simple alternative plan to replace activities that were scheduled, in case of an emergency, such as an illness. You will have less stress, because you are ready.

- Head off conflicts by sticking to your agreement and being flexible with your plans if your ex asks you to, even at the last minute. (Remember, "it is far better to give than to receive." Because when you give, it will eventually come back to you in bigger dividends.)

### 3. GIFT GIVING

**DON'T** compete for your child's love and loyalty or try to outdo each other "buying your kids". As the non-custodial parent you might feel that you need to make up for being the absent parent by indulging your child's whims. This is not healthy parenting. You will grow to resent it, and your child will likely test you and take advantage.

**DO** talk to your ex, if you can about your child's gift list and divide the items. Or if you can, go in together for a bigger gift.

### 4. KIDS NEED TIME TO ADJUST TOO

**DON'T** react when your kids have difficulty going back and forth between two homes and when they over react to little things because of feelings of confusion and insecurity.

**DO** give your kids time to adjust and help them feel safe no matter what home they are in. Your kids will be comforted knowing that you understand and will take care of them. One of the best gifts you can give your kids is permission to love both parents. Your kids may be missing the other parent. Allow your child to communicate with the absent parent.

### 5. PARENTS NEED TO DECIDE WHERE AND WHEN TO GO

**DON'T** give your kids too much power. Having kids choose to spend time with one parent over the other is a burden for a child, which can cause your child to feel guilty. It also gives the child more power than is appropriate. Divorced families often fall into the trap of giving the kids too much power. (Your kids don't decide if they want to go to school or not.)

**DO** allow your kids to make age-appropriate decisions, like what they will wear. It helps kids feel more confident. Try to have support, a close relative, counselor or pastor you can turn to for advice.

### 6. STEPPARENT AND STEP

### SIBLINGS

**DON'T** force children to act happy if they are not. However, you can request that your child spend a brief period of time with the family. It may be helpful to stipulate certain requirements such as saying hello and being respectful.

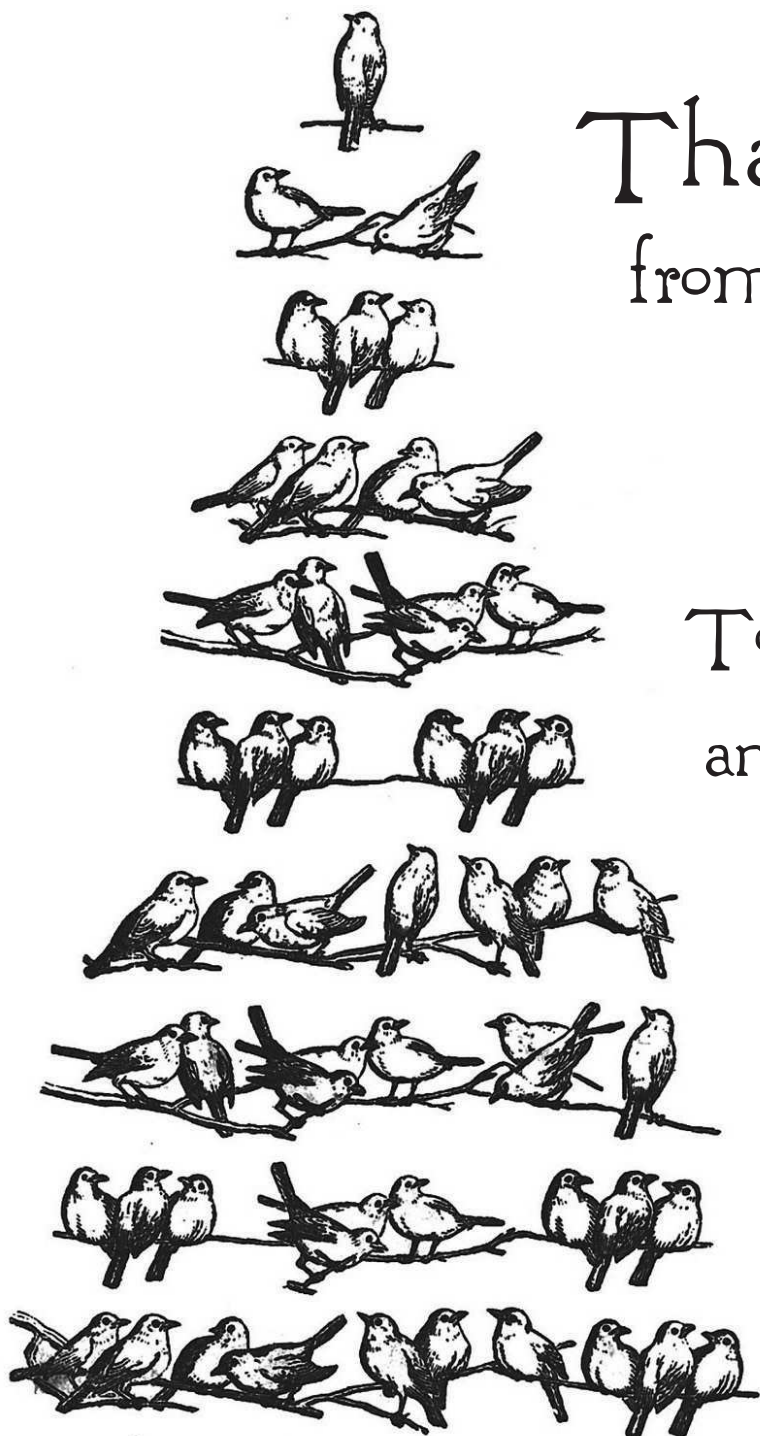
**DO** allow your kids to share how they feel. It is natural to experience some sadness around the holidays when we talk about the "old ways." Take a few moments to acknowledge and help your child mourn the loss of their family the way it used to be. Keep expectations realistic.

### 7. PRISONERS OF WAR

**DON'T** make your kids feel that if their mother is happy, their dad is sad or vice versa. Is this the way you want your children to see you? Is this the way you want your children to act with others? You will modeling that there is no such thing as a compromise, only victory or defeat.

**DO** Keep your eye on what is best for your children, freeing them from the obligation to keep both Mom and Dad happy. Tell them that in the spirit of the season you will organize your time with them and their other parent according to what works best for them. Let them know that this will make you happy to see them happy. You will be promoting the selfless spirit of the season for your kids if you do.

References: Paul B @Buzzle.com, Holly Aberly-Wetstone & Donna Ferber, MA, CAC, Risa Garon, LCSW-C, BCD, CFLE, Claudia M. Lenart, Kim Hess, Alan Ravitz, M.D, MS



Thank You  
from the Vernonia Prevention Coalition

To All Our Sponsors, Supporters, Partners  
and the Vernonia Community

We are looking forward to all  
our upcoming activities, events and  
collaborations in the new year.