

Controlling the Chaos

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For some families, the holiday season can become a mixture of anticipation, grief, stress, over commitment, awkward situations and unrealistic expectations; for stepfamilies, the stress is often twice as much. The holidays can put even the most cooperative parents and stepparents to the test.

Stepfamilies also face challenges that traditional families do not encounter. For example, which parent is going to give little Johnny the bike for Christmas? Where will the bike be stored? And where can little Johnny ride the bike? Where will the children spend Christmas Eve and Christmas Day? How can the parent who does not have the children be supportive of the children at the other parent's home? These are just some of the challenges stepfamilies encounter.

With some additional planning, flexibility and grace, the holiday season can still be enjoyable. The following are some tips to navigate the maze of emotion, expectation and grief:

1. **Keep Jesus the focus of the season.** For children, conflicts of loyalty and issues of loss can invade the joy of the holiday season if parents and stepparents are not careful. Even though it is hard, be supportive of the children visiting their other home.
2. **Plan ahead of time.** Be proactive. As a couple, discuss what family gatherings are important for the children. Contact the other parent and stepparent to discuss your ideas.
3. **Be flexible.** Remind yourself that you cannot make everyone happy. Some traditions may have to be put on hold this year even if Great Aunt Tilly will be disappointed.
4. **Be willing to make sacrifices.** Although it may *seem* as though you are the only one to make sacrifices, it is a good model for children and stepchildren to witness because in stepfamilies many people need to sacrifice in order to make things work.
5. **Stay in the present.** Stepfamily members often feel insecure about their belonging. Anxiety may creep in as stepfamily members anticipate the celebration to come. Additionally, the holidays can have a way of bringing up past hurts and disappointments and leave a feeling of bitterness.
6. **Keep things in perspective.** Former spouses sometimes have major conflicts at this time of year because they are triggered by a bigger issue. If you are developing resentment or anger, it is time to examine your own heart. Perhaps

your former spouse did not do anything terribly wrong and may have a legitimate way of looking at the situation, or legitimate ideas.

7. **Have realistic expectations for yourself and others.** You may want your home to look pristine and all family members to act perfectly but this is unrealistic. It may be better to decorate the tree with your stepdaughter than to clean the house.
8. **Do not over-book yourself or your children.** Children and adults who are overbooked only become stressed out by all the running around.

Lastly, give yourself grace and the freedom to breathe. With patience, flexibility and grace, stepfamilies can create lasting memories and have an enjoyable holiday season.

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