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Ask the Experts: Ten Tips for the Holidays

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1. Have a very specific plan for the holidays so there is no opportunity for confusion or conflict. Parents may alternate or split holidays, but when there is disagreement about this plan, consider the longer view of alternating holidays by even and odd years. Holidays are often a time of heightened emotions, and the reality of the loss associated with separation or divorce is no more apparent than when parents must spend a holiday without their children or without old traditions.

2. Try to continue traditions of the past for the children. If they are accustomed to spending Christmas Eve with one extended family, try to continue that tradition, if not every year then in alternate years. Parents should consider maintaining some of the family traditions the first year after the separation, and alternating beginning the following year.

3. If you can continue some traditions together, make them clear, attending to details of who, what, where, when, and how. Some families are able to be together without conflict arising, but parents often have different expectations about the experience itself, as well as the amount of time they will be together. The most important thing for the children is that they do not experience conflict between their parents.

4. Create new traditions that feel special to the children and family. This is an opportunity for the new family configuration to establish new traditions for the holidays including creation of a special holiday celebration or experience on a day other than the actual holiday. It is also an opportunity for the adult who does not have the children, to establish new practices such as time with friends, volunteering, movie days, and travel.

5. Think long-term—what do you want your children to remember about holidays when they have their own children? For children, holidays are magical. It is often the little rituals and practices that are most memorable, such as baking a pie, playing a game or lighting the fire.

6. Remember, children's memories include all senses—what they saw, heard, smelled, tasted and touched. To the extent possible, create a memory that involves each of these senses and describe it, e.g. we always listen to this music, eat cranberry sauce,

watch this movie, read this book, take this walk, and cut these branches. Do not allow conflict to enter into these memories.

7. Self-care is very important. Life for the adults has significantly changed. Find new ways to care for yourself, e.g. exercise, friends, books, movies, clubs, martial arts, dance, classes, activities that bring new energy and attention. You want to rejuvenate yourself and refocus on something to help you reconstitute yourself in your new life.

8. Keep your expectations small and be flexible. Focus on one thing that matters most to you during the holidays, e.g. some sense of connection to your family, having some time with extended family or close friends, creating a new tradition, continuing a tradition. Your holiday time will not be the same, but you can decide that you will have one small goal that you will work toward creating or preserving. Holidays may be accompanied by unmet needs and dashed hopes. By thinking small you can manage disappointment and decrease stress.

9. Though you, the parent, may feel disoriented and lost in the changed family, keep your focus on the children and the new family constellations. Make the holidays about your children, which means helping them to feel good about spending holiday time with the other parent.

10. In ten years or twenty years, what do you want to see when you look back on these years of change? From that long view you can highlight the tone and experience of these transformed holidays. Remember, children who find holidays stressful because of the conflict between their parents, have terrible memories as adults of holidays and of special family moments. It is in your hands to create fond, pleasant memories for your children. They can be traditional or not, but the message is that you and our family are important and we find ways to celebrate and enjoy holidays.

Dr. Robin Deutsch provides consultation, mediation, parenting coordination and expert witness services in Wellesley, MA. She developed and was the director of the Center of Excellence for Children, Families and the Law at the William James College. Previously she was an Associate Clinical Professor of Psychology at Harvard Medical School. Dr. Deutsch was the co-chair of the AFCC Child Consultant Task Force. She served on both the AFCC and APA task forces that developed Guidelines for Parenting Coordination, the AFCC task force for Guidelines for Examining Intimate Partner Violence and the AFCC task force for Court-Involved Therapists. She is the past president of the Massachusetts chapter of AFCC, past president of the AFCC, and former Chair of the APA Ethics Committee.