

Expert offers tips on coping with divorce during the holidays

December 13 2016, by Julia Bernstein

The holidays are usually a time when families gather together to eat, open gifts and catch up. However, for some families who have experienced a divorce, the holidays can be difficult. One Baylor College of Medicine expert offers his tips on how to cope with divorce so families can enjoy the holidays.

"For most families who have a divorce happen, there is a big impact during the holidays. This impact has to do with where the [children](#) go and which [family members](#) see people at what time period," said Dr. James Bray, associate professor of family and community medicine at Baylor and a family psychologist. "In some states there are guidelines that say where kids go for certain holidays. For example, the guidelines could say that one parent has the children for Thanksgiving and the other one has them for Christmas and then it flips every other year."

Because of this, Bray explained that families often celebrate holidays at different times rather than on the holiday itself. He also said that for holidays like Christmas or Hanukkah where gifts are exchanged, it may require more coordination because children are expected to be multiple places at multiple times. This situation often raises pre-existing tensions and conflicts between people.

To help avoid conflicts or awkward situations, Bray recommends the following tips to parents and families:

- Keep in mind that the focus during the holidays should be about

making the transition between multiple places as smooth as possible for children, which means that parents should try to be flexible.

- Kids may be expected to attend multiple meals so they may not want to eat lots of food at two or three different places. Therefore, people shouldn't get their feelings hurt if the children don't want to eat a full meal.
- Families should make contingency plans in case there are travel difficulties, such as a delayed flight or heavy traffic on the roadways.
- It is important that people manage their alcohol intake during the holidays because drinking can lead to talking or behaving in ways that might bring up old issues or painful wounds.

Bray also said one positive way of looking at the situation is to remember that while people often have family traditions for holidays, a divorce can open up the possibility of changing some traditions that people may not like. However, he cautions that discussing possible changes with family members is very important.

He added that the holidays are not only potentially difficult on divorced families but on blended families as well, especially if it's the first year everyone is celebrating together.

"With blended families it is very important for people to talk about the expectations about how people celebrate the holiday. For example, in some families, where a person sits, who carves the turkey, who brings what dish is really important," Bray said. "If you're bringing somebody new into the family because of a remarriage or a re-partnering, you want to make sure that you explain to them how the [family](#) celebrates so that the person feels comfortable."

Overall, Bray said families should remember that the holidays are most

importantly about being together.

"If families remember that the [holidays](#) are about enjoying each other's company and having a good time, then great memories will be made."

Provided by Baylor College of Medicine

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