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HAGELIN: Keeping holiday joyous in divided family

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ANALYSIS/OPINION:

Culture challenge of the week: Parents divided

Thanksgiving has flown past and Christmas and Hanukkah are around the corner. Sadly, though, holiday celebrations in many families have become dreaded occasions — fraught with tension and division rather than filled with family warmth and festivity.

The causes are as varied as families themselves: estrangement between parents and adult children, political passion that degenerates into personal animosity, the self-absorption of both teens and adults.

Holidays may be particularly painful — even disastrous — for the parents and children of divorce.

A good friend recently shared the story of her sister and brother-in-law. Divorced three years ago, they share custody of their young sons. The boys are "well-adjusted" (in the language of social workers and counselors), accustomed to bouncing between their parents' new homes, seemingly not batting an eye at the difference between "Mom's rules" and "Dad's rules," "Mom's traditions" and "Dad's traditions."

But while the parents have "moved on" and embraced their now-separate lives, their children still mourn the loss of "together times," when Christmas was just "Christmas," not "Christmas at Mom's" or "Christmas at Dad's." Holiday photos stand as poignant reminders of unity now shattered and traditions forever lost.

Children so easily see things in black and white. Even the most amicable split is still the breakup of the family team. And there's no getting around the fact that divorce means the two people coaching the family team have gone their separate ways. In a child's mind, the coach who leaves one team to lead another can't be devoted to the first team's success in the way that he or she once was.

That's the challenge of divorced parents — they must resist the temptation to sideline the other, relegating one parent (especially the non-custodial parent) to the role of occasional cheerleader (or even turncoat) instead of on-field leader. The challenge, especially around the holidays, for parents who have divorced is to bind the best of the old with the promise of the new.

How to save your family: Communicate complementary messages

Divorced parents are forever yoked to each other by their mutual love for their children. Let that love be the motivator for mutual respect and communication. Adults who make their children's well-being their priority will work together and communicate with each other (by email if that's a better way to keep the lid on simmering emotions) in order to love, form and discipline their children in a consistent way between their two homes.

So when it comes to holidays, what can divorced parents do to create that consistent atmosphere of family warmth?

Communicate. This is the most significant piece of co-parenting, whether in the same household or separate ones. When communication breaks down, everything else will follow. Studies on the effects of divorce on children show markedly higher success rates in life for children with consistent boundaries and parents who communicate for their children's sakes.

This is crucial for the holidays. If you consider midnight Mass or Christmas morning services a necessary part of your celebration, then communicate that, up front, to the former spouse. Take each other's plans and priorities into account and remember to prioritize the children's experience over your own.

Make new memories or traditions together, — perhaps on neutral ground. Consider a caroling trip to a neighborhood or nursing home, working a food drive together, or spending an afternoon visiting Santa and enjoying hot chocolate. Decide what kind of traditions still might be possible for you to celebrate together, peacefully.

Create new traditions within each family. Perhaps Christmas Eve will become a newly festive occasion, instead of a frenzied evening of wrapping and last-minute errands. See the challenge of scheduling alternate holiday celebrations as an opportunity for new rituals and memory-making.

Decide together how you will approach holiday themes like Santa — both parents need to sound the same message.

Finally, don't criticize the former spouse's new holiday rituals or celebrations. Things are different from Mom's house to Dad's, but resist the temptation to send the message that it's "better" at your house than at your ex's.

Parenting as a team can be difficult for married couples and sometimes can seem impossible for couples who have separated, particularly when remarriage and stepchildren enter the picture.

But family is forever. Send your children the message that both of you still are committed to them — and make these holidays the special celebrations of love that they are meant to be.

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