

“Over the River and Through the Woods... Whose House Are We Going To? Family Law Do’s and Don’t’s For the Holiday Season” by Jennifer G. Feingold

The holidays are a precarious mixture of jovial gatherings and chaotic celebration for even the strongest of family units. For those more fragile families who are newly separated, divorced and/or blended - the holidays can be a combination of discord that leaves one fear and loathing as those jingle bells start to play. For children, the holidays encompass all that is good – the joy, love and whimsical fantasy of The Polar Express, flying reindeer and spinning dreidles. How then, can a separated or divorced family navigate the holiday conundrum of dividing a holiday? Common issues such as “But mom, I want to be able to go with dad to Grandma’s house for lunch and he says I have to come home to you at noon” to “can’t I please sleep here with you tonight for Christmas Eve?” to what happens when Christmas and Chanukah fall on the same night, can hamper both parents and children’s ability to truly enjoy the holiday season.

Here are the top 5 ‘Do’s’ and ‘Don’ts’ for the holiday season:

Do:

1. Communicate – early, often and thoughtfully with the other parent. As hard as it might be initially, it will save you from unnecessary conflict or confusion when the holidays hit!
2. Let your kids’ light shine – if you already made the amazingly unselfish choice to have children, then the hard part’s done. The holidays are about the children – from their wonder and awe to their belief and joy. Let your children’s light shine by putting their needs first, before your own and before any conflict.
3. Listen to your children and hear what they need. Ask yourself, is it worth spending most of Christmas in a car so that Christmas day can be split evenly? Ask your child how they would like to celebrate, they likely want to spend it with both parents, and may come up with a great and surprising solution that will help make the holidays easier.
4. Plan – to be with family and long-standing friends. Regardless of whether you have your children with you or not, it is important for parents to surround themselves in a warm and comforting community. Even though it may be different, plan on engaging in the same rituals you did before the divorce or separation. There is comfort in continuity.
5. Take care of you – exercise, journal, immerse yourself in a good book – take advantage of the quiet time by filling yourself up internally as opposed to forcing the external factors to take charge.

Don't:

1. Disparage the other parent. This may go without saying, but especially over the holidays, try to accept your differences and focus on the present. Do not waste precious time with your children (or within earshot of your children) by disparaging or criticizing the other parent.

2. Wait until the last minute to make plans. See number 3 above under the “Do” column and take charge!
3. Drink heavily. It is not going to make the holidays better and will surely not help you feel better the next day.
4. Travel alone – it may be more overwhelming and lonely than you expect over the holiday season. It harkens to the old adage – wherever you go, there you are. Don’t choose to be alone during the holidays.
5. Forget the power of belief – it is stronger than we think. Challenge yourself to do something that makes your children believe – whether it is giving your ex a small gift in front of the children or volunteering at a mission – don’t forget that believing and doing are powerful and impactful – on you and on your children.

Happy Holidays from the domestic team at FGMC – Jennifer Feingold, Katharine Jensen & Dee Dee Williams