

COPING WITH CHRISTMAS - TIMELY TIPS FOR SEPARATED MUMS AND DADS

For most of us, Christmas is a happy time, a time when families and friends get together to swap presents and stories, share meals and homes and generally enjoy each other's company.

But, Brisbane based Specialist Family Lawyer, Michael Lynch author of the book "A Guide to Family Law – Everyday Answers" knows well that for families where parents are separated or divorced, Christmas can be a time of sadness, disappointment and disagreement and caught in the middle of it, are the children.

So, what can separated and divorced parents do to make Christmas a little easier on themselves and their children?

One of the most important things is to realise that Christmas is a time for your children.

From a legal point of view, residence and contact time are ordered by the Court for your children's benefit, not for your benefit.

Therefore, it is important to remember that contact with your children over Christmas is for their benefit, not yours.

Many disagreements start because of parents' expectations of what will happen. You expect that children will spend Christmas with you. The other parent may expect the same.

Parents need to communicate with each other and plan for these times before they arrive. By planning ahead of time, Christmas has a chance to be happier and far less stressful for everyone involved.

And if you make your children's happiness your priority when making any plans, you will be well on the way to a happier time.

Understanding some simple facts about children can also help. Here's just a few helpful thoughts:

- Children often experience a great deal of tension at Christmas.
- They often feel responsible for making both parents happy.
- The dream for most children is that their family will be together. Security is a real issue for them. It is something they need.
- They often feel that it is their fault that their parents broke up.
- They try to come to terms with their parents not being together.
- They are expected to move from one home to another to spend time with each parent. While this may be okay for short periods during the year, at Christmas the time spent with each parent can be longer.

This can change the dynamics of the home and can cause problems, particularly with “blended” families.

- They conform to keep others happy and often don't even know how to express their feelings about all that is going on. This can mean that on the surface everything seems to be okay. In reality, children may be experiencing a storm of unexpressed emotion.
- They don't have the understanding in life experiences that adults do. It is more difficult for them to make meaning of the situations they are in. Young children especially are unable to think things through in a rational way. They can only react to situations.
- Adults also have a greater capacity to make choices. Children don't.
- Regardless of what has happened between you, it is important not to criticise the other parent when talking to your children. You need to accept that your children love their other parent and the relationship that they have with that parent must be protected. By criticising their other parent, you create tension for your children, because they may want to please you and agree with you, but at the same time they still love their other parent. Steps in Avoiding Conflict at Christmas:
 1. Agree on what you will do so that there is no tension.
 2. Discuss your ideas with your children.
 3. Ask your children what they want to do. Give them input and some control over the process (this may depend on how old they are, however, all children should have the chance to say what they want to do).
 4. Listen closely to what they say.
 5. Put their desires ahead of yours.
 6. Avoid situations where your children are drawn into the centre of the conflict.
 7. If your children's wishes can't be met, take the time to sit down with them and explain why.

Despite all your efforts it is possible that difficulties may still arise. You must take responsibility for what you do as a parent, however you cannot be responsible for how the other parent behaves.

You can do everything in your power, but they may still not cooperate. If you find yourself in this situation, always remember that help is available.

A Counsellor can offer helpful advice on how to cope with difficult relationships and situations. They can also help by suggesting ways to communicate and reach agreement with your former partner in matters relating to your children.

A lawyer can also explain what the law says regarding various situations with relationships and children and give you advice about the options available to you.

Remember, legal issues take time to resolve. If there are legal issues relating to your circumstances, give yourself plenty of time to discuss them with your lawyer and allow a number of weeks for the outcome to be finalised.

Communication is the key. Start communicating well ahead of time and keep your children's happiness as your priority and you will have made a good start to a happier Christmas.