

# PLANNING FOR A JOYOUS HOLIDAY

By Eleanor S. Alden, LCSW, BCD



Holidays in StepFamilies can be a sharing wonderful time with each person being honored and included in some of the multiple activities planned by various groups or a nightmare of hurt feelings, disappointments, and feelings of being excluded by too many members. Handling the various planned events such as dinners, religious services, picnics, and varied family traditions involves a lot of forethought. However, if managed with a willingness to truly honor the needs and wants of each individual and each sub group it can be an series of events which leave all feeling content and happy.

## History gathering:

A history of past holidays is time consuming for some families, but is the best way to start the process without conflict. What did your family do when you were a child? In the past few years? What did other people in the extended family being

considered do, both in the past and recently? Be as conflict avoidant as possible in just gathering information about holidays - be it Thanksgiving, Passover, Easter, Memorial Day, Christmas, New Years, Hanukah, Labor Day, July 4<sup>th</sup> or any other special holiday, religious or cultural which was important to you and those now in the family. What parts of the traditions do you want to keep, what do you want to be different.

Everyone involved who is willing can participate in this. Sometimes you will learn a lot about each other's past, and can learn what even five and six year olds value from their memories or expectations. Some people remember midnight services, others a particular food. Some remember picnics, others drunken nightmare evenings. For some people the religion aspect of Christmas for its trips to church is most important, for others it is the joy of remembered family gatherings. Some open presents in Christmas Eve, others not until after breakfast the next day. Get the details and the emotional impact and importance. Some memories are just that, and can't be repeated, but they need to be heard.

This is a fact finding activity and no decisions about developing new traditions needs to be included until all the participants, including biological and stepparent figures have the information in front of them. This can be done in person, mail, my e-mail, phone, or some combination of the above. Grandparents may be included if they have been an important part of the events in the past.

From there be creative. Determine which of the traditions are the most important for each person. It may be a traditional dinner or a religious service. It can be a set of rituals around opening presents: opening presents in a circle, one person at a time can teach children to enjoy giving as well as receiving. A mad house of ripping into wrapping paper all at once goes faster, but its total focus is on "what did I get," not "what joy did my gift give."

Can the children spend part of a holiday with one parent, or set of grandparents, and one part with the other parent? Some families have the children spend Christmas Eve with one parent, and Christmas Day (moving between houses before or after breakfast) with the other. Other families, due to distance, will alternate years as to where the children are for each major holiday.

Thanksgiving may be harder to negotiate with a move mid-day as no one needs to eat two dinners, but some families have an early afternoon feast at one house, and the children have dessert with the other parent. Saturday or Sunday can also serve well as a second holiday of celebration.

Fourth of July can at times be the most difficult to work out a shared time with each parent. The local authorities are not going to have fireworks at two separate times, so alternating years, or simply having one parent have the children on the Fourth of July, and the other pick Labor Day or Memorial Day, depending on how important each is, logistics of travel, etc. needs to be considered.

Father's Day and Mother's Day needs to be spent with the biological parent if at all possible. Alcoholism, drug addiction, or simply the death of one biological parent or other reason for absence may make this impossible, or dangerous. But acknowledging that Stepparents are different and not replacing a biological parent tends to reduce the stress of pulled loyalties in children and adults alike.

My honest hope is that there may someday be a StepMother and StepFather Day which acknowledges both the difference and the specialness of the role. In meantime families can make up a stepparent day that works for them, and honors the people who work so hard in these roles.

A child's birthday is often the source of pain and conflict. Dividing the day, alternating years, or making two birthday days close together are all alternatives which can increase a child's sense of well-being and self-confidence. Some families get along well enough for the sake of the children that everyone step and biological parents can be included in a celebration. This is in many ways ideal, but not possible for many. Having parents or stepparents who dislike each other and show such is not a fun way for anyone, child or adult, to spend a birthday or any holiday. Children then feel like they need to placate and become the peacemaker, and may end up dreading their own birthday or some other holiday shared with all the parent figures.

The focus is primarily what works for the health of the children whose personalities are still forming, but parental mental health is a large part of how happy and healthy children are. The degree to which people can be generous and thoughtful of others while keeping appropriate boundaries makes this a model of cooperation that children can share in as they get older. Flexibility is immensely important to all of us in many situations, modeling it and practicing it is beneficial to all. Talk about it with each other. If one parent is giving up something for the sake of the others, be grateful. An attitude of thankfulness can go a long way to making a painful loss into something which strengthens an appropriate sense of self-confidence and self-worth. If you need help in the negotiations, mediators and therapists are often more objective and less emotionally entangled in this process and can be invaluable.

Whatever you do: DO NOT procrastinate. Waiting and seeing what will come up and hiding ones head in the proverbial sand hoping somehow all will magically sort

itself out without any hint of conflict does not serve anyone. This kind of passive behavior is at the root of a lot of divorces, unpleasant holidays, and children who grow up wanting to have their holidays anywhere else but with the parents who didn't make sure the holidays ran as smoothly as possible. This kind of planning can take months. August is not too soon to talk about the fall and winter holidays. It is respectful and honoring or everyone to do such. January is not too soon to talk about spring holidays and summer vacations. Avoiding doing such in the long run mean you are raising children who will be delighted to spend their holidays elsewhere. If you want to see your children and eventual grandchildren at holidays in the future, making sure that the present day holidays are pleasant is a pre-requisite.

One man's family of origin had been so filled with conflicts over the Christmas and New Year holidays that after he left home he developed a new tradition for himself. He went skiing and completely avoided his birth family. For the first time in his life he enjoyed and looked forward to the holidays. He was doing something he loved, it was beautiful and peaceful, and no one with whom he interacted was drunk, or angry.

Once he became engaged to a woman with children he was anxious and defensive about the holidays again. He could not imagine that spending the holidays with her parents and her children would be much different than the holidays of his childhood. The couple felt that this issue might end their engagement as a skiing holiday without her children and her parents was not something the woman thought she wanted to tolerate, nor did she want to marry a man who would abandon her every Christmas. In the end her parents, who loved their grandchildren, and liked their daughter's fiancé agreed to rent a place in his favorite ski resort for the entire Christmas and New Year's holidays. The whole event is now a tradition as everyone had a wonderful time.

The children spent alternate years with one parent for Christmas and the other for New Years. After the first two years there has been some discussion of the children's biological father and that family renting a condo in the same valley so the children can ski the whole week, and then just move a few miles half way through the week to where they sleep and eat. Everyone has to love winter sports of fireplaces and a book for this to work, but it is a workable compromise for some families. A less expensive compromise could be to rent one condo and have the adults split the cost, each parental couple staying half the week, and at the time for the switch the parents move in and out, not the children.

This kind of flexibility is important for everyone to enjoy the holidays. But in the above example, the situation is simplified by the lack of interest the man has in

spending anytime with his family of origin, whose bad planning and lack of respect for the meaning of the holidays has left them out of any future plans he may have for holidays even if he and his new wife have children of their own.

There are endless combinations of family traditions, new, old and in the making that can work for stepfamilies. Locking yourself into what used to be, or what you are used to, may exclude a lot of wonderful times. For some people traditions are more important than they are for others, but traditions can be developed that are unique to stepfamilies and which bring comfort to all. Just as some biological families alternate between the man's family and the woman's family, some people alternate quite happily with children knowing that even years they spend with Dad, and odd years they spend with their mother. If this is a pleasant time for all, it may continue to be honored decades later when the children have their own children.

Having two of everything is not a hard thing to sell most children. That with the new stepparent comes two Christmases or two birthdays, two rooms, two Thanksgivings, and double the number of people who love you is an easy thing to sell if done with positive enthusiasm. If you are convinced you are a victim in all this, the children will at least consider themselves to be victims too for a while. This is not an attitude that fosters self-confidence and happiness.

I am aware that often one set of parents may have the best intentions in the world and another may appear to be determined to spoil any attempts to make the holidays a happy success. But if you do your best to engage everyone in focusing on sharing the holidays in the most effective and pleasant way possible without engaging the children in playing referee, or taking sides, this can work to everyone's benefit. The worst thing that any parent or stepparent can do is make the kids feel they are demanded to take sides against one or the other parent, or that they need to choose which parent they would rather be. This not only harms their growth but will eventually harm the relationship with the parent demanding they align against the other parent.

If you are childless on alternating holidays, make a new tradition of enjoying something that does not include children, and have fun. Children, relatives, and friends do not need to feel pity and in some cases guilt for the "lonely" parent. Single people and childless couples enjoy holidays, you can too.

## GIFTS

This topic can be a nightmare. Especially if there is an economic difference between families, and can lead to difficulties with half-siblings who may not have

nearly as many relatives and therefore fewer gifts. Engaging everyone, including grandparents in some discussion of moderation is appropriate. When a biological mother who is struggling financially is confronted with her children getting presents from her ex-husband and his new wife that are ten times more expensive than anything she can afford it is at least painful, and at times humiliating. But, it can also be a lesson for children that love is not determined by a price tag. If a child would be a better student with a computer that one parent can afford, while gloves and a book is all the other can afford, there is wisdom to be gained from a discussion of such.

Some parents pool the Christmas money even after a divorce and buy things their children need, each giving half of what they jointly can afford. Others with less communication may not be able or willing to work cooperatively and if there is a large discrepancy in their budgets, it is sometimes easier if the gift giving is done separately.

It does get more complicated if there are new children who are half-siblings of the older children. They do not have stepparents buying them presents, nor at times as many aunts, uncles, and grandparents, and the younger children can feel quite upset at the smaller number of gifts they may receive as a result. Receiving an equal pile of gifts at the celebrations that all the siblings share may feel like work, but it minimizes the blatant discrepancies that can lead to hostility between half and step siblings. Grandparents can take children out to lunch to shower them with gifts if needed, as can stepparents. Again children can learn something important in this which translates to successful living in the world. Bragging to friends about how many more gifts you got than they did is a sure way to lose friends. Loving relationships of any sort do not need this kind of one-ups-man ship.

Some families pull names and each person gets one gift and gives one gift if money is tight. If one child may later receive an unusual large gift or number of gifts from the other side of the divorced parents families, do such somewhere else. Learning to be thoughtful, and not unnecessarily trigger envious feelings which harm relationships is a wonderful lesson for successful relationships all one's life.

Using the complexities and complications of holiday planning to expand adult cooperation skills and teach children such is one of the gifts of being in a stepfamily, and ignoring this potential gift is perilous and on some level absurd.

Enjoy the opportunities for growth and valuing the true meaning of each joyous holiday! Have fun!

Eleanor Alden, LCSW, BCD, April, 2010

