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# Happy Holidays

## How to help children survive the season after family court.

BY CHARLA H. BRADSHAW

“It is easier to build up a child than it is to repair an adult. ... Choose your words wisely.”

—Unknown

Much has been written about family court, the holidays, and the aftermath for children. There are a lot of ideas out there, but the practicality of implementing these in a family law case is often low. Court orders regarding children and holiday visitation might arise from divorce cases, paternity cases, modification cases, and cases involving grandparents and even aunts and uncles. After 22 years of practicing family law, I have learned the following lessons from some of the top mental health professionals in the country.

*The Golden Rule.* This tells us that families must be willing to accept that it is important for children to attend all family holidays, and that all family holidays and traditions are *equally important*. The families must look past their anger and do right by the children. What does this mean? Agreeing to a family court order that provides for a tailored holiday visitation schedule and takes into account all family traditions, which is truly in the best interest of a child. If a family cannot agree on holiday visitation, whether or not they can agree on weekly or weekend visitation, someone in the case simply does not have the child's best interest at heart.

*Plan ahead.* Another thing family members can do to make the holidays



more successful and stress-free for a child is to coordinate and plan in advance and inform the child ahead of time. The unknown can be stressful for children just as it is for adults. It is beneficial for a child to have enough time to deal with feelings and ask questions rather than being taken by surprise. The more details a child is given—such as who they will see, where they will go, how long they will be there, etc.—the better.

*Traditions.* In addition, new traditions can be created. These will lay a fresh foundation and will build excitement for future holidays—and the child should be involved in coming up with them. New traditions

could involve different celebrations, food to prepare, activities to experience, and more. The child will have things to look forward to in order to help him or her move forward from the past.

*Avoid negativity.* It is not unusual for families who have been through family court litigation to be bitter and for their bitterness to be exemplified during holidays. This could occur when one family member states negative things about another in the presence of a child. According to the mental health professionals I have worked with, such actions will likely cause emotional damage as well as damage to the child's self-esteem. A child is part of the creation of the family, and when a person speaks badly about a family member, it is the same as speaking badly about the child. This is one of the greatest stressors a family can place on a child. Adults should ensure that a child has all family members in his or her life at all times. This can be put into action during the holidays by all family members who are in the presence of the child saying something positive about the other family before the child leaves to be with the other family. **TBJ**



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