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## Splitting heirs over Christmas



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**SHEILA WAYMAN** The Irish Times

When making plans for a separated Christmas, your children's happiness is paramount, so parents need to take a step back and think about what's best for them

EVEN IN the happiest of households, the potent Christmas mix of emotional memories, hours cooped up with extended family and too much drink can put a severe strain on seasonal goodwill.

Where parents can no longer bear to live under the same roof, a happy Christmas for all may seem well nigh impossible. But for the sake of the children, they know they need to try.

The unanimous advice on coping with a separated Christmas is "make a plan". Every member of the family needs to know where they will be, when and with whom during the key festive days.

"If there is no plan, everyone just carries a knot of tension," says Glynis Good, counsellor with Teen Between, a support service for teenagers of separated parents run by the Marriage and Relationship Counselling Services. "The parents feel they are carrying it because the children are getting on with their lives as they see it; they may not be aware that the young people are as anxious and concerned about what is going to happen."

If children are spending Christmas Day with one parent, they will want to know what the other parent is doing and be assured that he/she will be okay. "Their parents' emotional wellbeing is a very real concern to them," she stresses.

When making a plan, focus on what is possible rather than impossible, Good says. And see what old traditions can be retained, but also come up with ideas for setting new traditions. While the first Christmas is always “hugely difficult”, every Christmas needs a plan as circumstances change.

“Separation is not an event, it is a process,” says Good, author of *When Parents Split*. “This process will continue, so parents learning to work co-operatively makes such a difference. It is so worthwhile for their children and, in the future, for their grandchildren.”

As one teenager said to her about Christmas: “Both my parents want me to please them by agreeing to do things their way. It puts me in a battle that I can never win.”

The ideal, if circumstances permit and they think they can carry it off, is for both parents to put their differences aside and spend time together with the children on Christmas Day. But that is not realistic for many separated couples.

“Some are very good at spending times like birthdays and Christmas together and their children may think they are the best of friends,” says Karen Kiernan, director of One Family. But for those who find it difficult even to discuss how Christmas should be organised, she recommends involving a trusted person in the negotiations, if necessary.

It is wonderful if separated parents can get together for a family meal on Christmas Day with good grace, agrees family law solicitor Anne O’Neill. “Obviously, it is not wonderful if it is an excuse for sniping and bickering or for other family members to have a go at the ex.”

It is possible to write a formula for Christmas into legal separation agreements, “without giving a whole lot of thought as to whether that formula is child friendly or not”, she says. It could be stipulated that the children spend Christmas Day with mum one year and dad the other, or the morning with mum and the afternoon with dad. Yet the feedback she gets is that children are often not happy with those arrangements.

“Those formulas are designed to make the parents feel better,” says O’Neill. Whereas children, who are creatures of habit, would often prefer to spend Christmas in one place.

As long as they know the other parent is okay, they may not be worried if they don’t see him or her on the day, she suggests. A long phone call or Skype session with the absent parent can be arranged instead.

“What parents need to think about is how do we not pathologise Christmas for our children? How do we ensure that they grow up with a happy memory of it?”

Eamonn Quinn of the Unmarried and Separated Parents of Ireland (USPI) organisation is adamant that fathers who have moved out should not seek to have their children with them every second Christmas. It is in the best interests of the children, he says, if they can stay in their customary home for Christmas Eve and at least the morning of Christmas Day.

Parents need to rise above their bitterness and put the child first, then things fall into place, he suggests.

The fact that Christmas Day is on a Saturday this year is causing problems as many fathers are granted access at weekends and so some are insisting they have their children as usual. Be flexible, give up your customary block of access, he advises, and instead ask for an hour or two with your children on Christmas Eve and then again on Christmas Day.

“Quality time is better than quantity. Sometimes people fight for X amount of access and then find it is too much.”

For parents who will not be with their children on Christmas morning, the USPI is holding a vigil on O’Connell Bridge in Dublin, from 11am to 1pm. It is not a protest, Quinn says, but rather to reassure parents who are spending the day apart from their children that they are not alone and to give them a focal point on Christmas Day, as an alternative to resorting to alcohol or other substances.

One Family encourages parents who are going to be without their children to reach out for the support of family and friends. They should not wake up on Christmas morning without a plan.

“Think of a different way of having Christmas,” says Kiernan. “It is really important to think about it in advance and not just arrive there – maybe grieve a little in advance.”

How you choose to spend it may depend on whether you feel okay being on your own or not. But there are things to do in public, she points out, such as fun runs, swims and volunteering – ways of being with other people.

Parents who are not going to be with their own children might be better off avoiding being with other people’s children on Christmas Day and instead try to be in adult-only company, says Rita O’Reilly, manager of Parentline.

She also suggests that separated parents arrange two Christmas celebrations for their children – even if the one that is not on the 25th does not have all the trimmings, it should have some of the customary elements.

Introducing new partners into the Christmas celebrations adds another layer of complexity. “The sad thing is that people are separating so much sooner and getting into new relationships so much sooner. Children’s lives have become really quite complicated with the extended relationships they have to deal with,” says Good.

She has sat down with children whose parents have broken up, they have gone into new relationships, they have broken up and they are now in third relationships “and these kids are only 12. What we say to teenagers,” she adds, “is that trying to arrange to see both your parents can be a pain, but remember what matters is that everybody does want to and is trying to make time for each other. It might not be easy, but it’s worth it – at least we hope it is!”

## **CHILDREN NEED PRESENCE RATHER THAN PRESENTS**

Separated parents intent on scoring points off each other can be very competitive over Christmas presents for the children, but ideally they should agree in advance on what is being bought.

“You have people overcompensating by paying wild amounts of money,” says family law solicitor Anne O’Neill. “It spoils the kids who are fierce cute. The first time you make that mistake, the child will know that ‘This is the way I can get mileage – play them off against one another’.”

Gifts to children should come jointly from mum and dad, advises parenting coach Liz Quish, even if there are two presents which were bought separately. She also recommends that each parent goes out with the children to buy a present for the other parent.

“Some parents who can’t stand each other may think that they are not spending a fiver on him/her, but it is for the children at the end of the day and that is what you have got to look at.”

Eamonn Quinn of Unmarried and Separated Parents of Ireland advises simply that “presence” is what counts, rather than “presents”.

### **'IF I LEAVE THEM TO HIM AT 2 O'CLOCK, I'M SITTING THERE ON MY OWN . . . BUT I WILL GET OVER THAT'**

Anne, who is facing her first Christmas as a separated parent after 11 years of marriage, would like to spend some part of the day with her estranged husband for the sake of the children.

Various options have been put to him but, as they are not talking, no plan had been made at the time of this interview, with just three weeks to go.

She did ask the children, aged eight and six, what they wanted to do, but their main concern was that they be in their current house for Santa.

“My heart broke,” she says, when she saw her son’s letter to Santa. “He wrote, ‘Dear Santa, Thank you for what you brought last year. This is what I want this year and just to let you know my parents have separated and I am living in a new house now and this is my address’. God love him.”

The younger child, when consulted, just said she wanted to be at the party her grandmother holds every Christmas Eve.

Anne’s first thought was that their father could come for dinner at the house she has been renting since she and the children moved out of the family home in Co Mayo five months ago.

Then she thought a neutral venue might be a better idea and suggested going to a hotel for Christmas dinner, but she has had no response to that idea either.

His mother asked her if she would be prepared to go back to the home for a day if he cooked dinner. “It would be hard for me to do. but for the kids – if I had to – I would be fine with that.”

If they can’t manage being together for a few hours, they could share the day, she says. “They could be with me in the morning and I would leave them up to him in the afternoon.”

She does not really mind what they do, but wishes there was a plan in place. Traditionally, they went to his parents on Christmas Eve night; there was just the four of them at home on Christmas Day; and then on December 27th she took the children to her parents who live five hours’ drive away.

Anne imagines it will be very hard for her husband alone in the family home, “waking up Christmas morning, Santa’s not coming”. She feels it is easier for her, in a new place, with the kids to keep her going.

However, unlike him, she has no extended family around. “If I leave them to him at 2 o’clock, I’m sitting there on my own. But my attitude is it is only one day. I will get over that for one day.”

Her saving grace is “that I have peace of mind now – that is what keeps me going, it is my strength. You can’t put a price on that. The tension I had is gone; it is such a huge relief.

“That doesn’t mean,” she adds, “that I might not be crying my eyes out on Christmas Day.”

For Lisa\*, this will be the fifth Christmas since she left the family home and she will celebrate it on December 24th with her two teenage children, along with her siblings and their families. Her children will then go to their father, who has them every weekend, on Christmas morning.

“Some years we split Christmas Day up between us, but the kids did not really like that, being shunted about from one place to another halfway through the day,” she says.

Extended family gatherings are problematic. Members of her family like to keep in touch with her ex-husband, but he will not countenance being in the same room as her, so they take opportunities when Lisa is not around to invite him over.

“His attitude makes it impossible for my children to even contemplate acknowledging my new partner,” she says. “They would feel so disloyal.” As a result, her partner will be excluded from the Christmas Eve festivities.

“I was over-optimistic about how this would all work out,” sighs Lisa. “The kids feel very awkward, and it is not good for me, reinforcing that I am the “nasty mother” who left.”