

Happy Holiday Tips for Blended Families

By Dr. Jenn Berman

Blended families, the merging of two single parents and their children into a new family system, are forming at the rate of 1,300 new families a day. The odds are you or someone you know is part of this new type of family. Think the Brady bunch.

The holidays are tricky, but for blended families they can feel like a complex maze filled with minefields. Think the anti-Brady bunch. But there are some things that can be done to make the holidays a little easier. Even if you are not part of a blended family, you may find some of these suggestions helpful.

Accept the Facts

To begin with, don't expect your holiday dinner to be a Norman Rockwell painting. The truth of life is that most families have some tension and conflict. The holiday season, in particular, tends to be more stressful than most people acknowledge. Strive to have what I call the "good enough" holiday, instead of the "perfect holiday." Erase the images from your head of everyone sitting around the table laughing and eating turkey together. The odds are your teenage stepdaughter is going to ask if she can have Thanksgiving at a friend's house, your stepson is going to tell you the turkey doesn't taste the same as his Mom's, and someone at the table is going to drink too much. I don't mean to sound like Ebenezer Scrooge, but it is important to be prepared for the worst.

It Gets Easier

For newly separated couples, the holidays can be particularly difficult. It is important to understand that the first one is always the most

difficult. It does get easier. Holidays are a difficult time of the year for everyone, even under the best of circumstances. In order to get through them in one piece, get support from the people closest to you.

Stay Present

Many people find that it is easy to zone out during the holiday meal. Thanksgiving seems particularly conducive to this because of all the turkey, pie, and alcohol. I always recommend limiting drinking. After a couple of glasses of wine it can seem like a good idea to tell your children the real reason your first marriage didn't work out. Not a good idea!

Overeating is another easy way to emotionally leave the room. It is very difficult to concentrate when you have tryptophan from turkey flowing through your veins, lulling you to sleep. If you are so full that you are uncomfortable in your own skin, you won't be able to concentrate on what is happening in the room. I always think of overeating as a red flag that feelings may be coming up that are not pleasant to feel. While sometimes a turkey is just a turkey, I recommend keeping this idea in mind as you approach the table this year.

Think of the Children

It is important for parents to keep focused on what is most important during this time... the kids. Make sure that they are your priority. Especially if you had a bad break up with your former spouse, it is particularly important that you focus on creating a good experience for the children. The odds are they are still feeling the sting from the dissolution of your former marriage.

Keep the Old... and Bring In the New!

Holidays often highlight how much things have changed. One little girl I know was just devastated that for the first time she didn't get to bake the night before Thanksgiving. Her mom had told her they would bake their special Thanksgiving cookies over the weekend. She hadn't realized how important that ritual was to her daughter. In addition to honoring old traditions, it is important to start some new ones with your blended family. Let your kids participate in coming up with new ideas for family rituals.

Accept that the holidays will be a challenging time for you and your children. Aim for progress, not perfection. This mindset will take stress off of you and your family. Do your best to make the holiday a positive experience for your kids, and whatever you do, don't put them in the middle of arguments between you and your ex. Have a wonderful holiday!



Ten Tips for Blended Families During the Holiday Season

- 1) Strive for the "good-enough" holiday instead of the "perfect" holiday.
- 2) Get support from people close to you.
- 3) Aim for respect, not love between family members.
- 4) Schedule visitations in advance but be flexible.
- 5) Treat all children equally. Don't buy your bio-children more gifts than your step-children.
- 6) Allow your family to mourn the loss of old roles and traditions without blame.
- 7) Honor old traditions and create new ones.
- 8) Don't use the holidays to introduce your new boyfriend or girlfriend.
- 9) Don't put your kids in the middle of arguments with your spouse.
- 10) Limit drinking and do your best not too overeat.