

Make the most of a holiday stay

Ten great ways you can make the most of the extra time you spend with your children in the holidays

By Chris Barnardo

When the holidays come, millions of separated dads and their kids spend more time together. It's a time of year that all single dads look forward to, a time to trade the morsel of "staying access" for a

proper slice of family life. However, spending a whole week together with your children is not simply an extended version of a weekend overnight stay. Here are ten tips that will help you get the most out of this

special, extra time you spend with your children.

(This is a slightly longer version of the article written specially for the Guardian newspaper (Family Section) published on the 4th August 2007.)

Negotiate sensibly and early

Make a note of what you agree; it's easy to forget the detail of arrangements later, especially if you agreed them months before. Be fair and flexible; remember you and your ex-partner both have holiday needs. If your ex-partner has work commitments try to take some days leave to share out the holiday childcare.

Don't over promise

Don't oversell the holiday to your children or get competitive about who is going to give them the best holiday. You may be staying at home with your children while your ex-partner is taking them abroad, or the other way round. Remember, you just want your children to have a lovely time, during the holidays whoever they're with, and wherever they are.

Plan the time

If you're going away, choose and plan the holiday with your children. If you're staying at home, make a rough daily plan before the holiday starts; outings, a picnic, a family barbeque, a film or a making and doing day, for example (there are plenty of ideas for things to do at home with your kids here on dadcando). Be flexible, the plan is only your guide.

Plan the food

A week of providing three meals a day will be a shock if you are not used to that routine. Don't spend the week eating takeaways or sitting in restaurants; plan to cook for them, they'll love it.

Strike the balance between wholesome food and treats, but cook food that you know they like.

Be prepared for minor illnesses

You only have a few days to it would be a pity to waste them on headaches, tummy upsets and sun burn. A change in a child's routine can cause problems which are often expressed as minor ailments like headaches and tummy upsets. Stock a basic medicine box with age appropriate paracetamol (Tylanol or Acetaminophen, US) medicine suspension and some small sticking plasters (band aids) and always use sun cream.

Make a packing list

If you are going away for a week, or even just a couple of days, start a packing list and get out the suitcase a few days before the holiday; put things on the list or in the suitcase as you think of them. For young children and even those up to the age of about 10 or 11 years old, remember to pack a favourite teddy or cuddly toy.

Promote contact

Encourage your child to phone, email or send a postcard to their mother. Help them to do this, especially younger children, but give them their privacy if they want to speak on the phone or write something in private, avoid the temptation to try and overhear what they are saying on the phone, and don't question them about what was said after they have hung up unless they look distressed after the call. Understand that they will be missing their mother and that this doesn't reflect on the holiday or how much they love you.

Don't quiz them about their other home

On an extended stay, you are likely to relax into longer and more interesting conversations. This is a great time to get to know your children, but don't use this opportunity to quiz them about their mother. Listen to them and take in what they have to say. If you want to know more about their life (and you should) then ask them about their school and their friends and get to know the sort of things they do while you're not around.

Relax

Don't try to do too much in this holiday. Pace yourself, there'll be other holidays, other weeks. Putting too much pressure on this time will only spoil it. If you've planned and you're prepared, then just relax and enjoy yourself. Be yourself with your kids. Remember, this is one more step in the growth of a relationship that has a life time to develop.

Be yourself

Resist the temptation to spoil them with expensive treats and gifts, they are not a substitute for your time and love; you're their dad not a toy shop. Your kids love you because you're their dad and you're there, just for them.