

Christmas without the Kids

Ten ways to make Christmas work for you even when you don't have your kids

By Chris Barnardo

Christmas is the highlight of every child's year, but can be a stressful time for parents. However, every parent's nightmare and many single dads' reality, is a Christmas Day without your kids. If this is your first Christmas as a separated parent, then Christmas will be difficult however well organised you are, and

no matter how cordial your relationship is with your ex-partner.

Of course you don't have to be separated to find yourself spending Christmas Day without your kids. You might have to be away on business, on duty, or stationed overseas, but whatever your circumstances, here are ten top tips (hard

won by experience of many Christmases spent without my nearest and dearest) on how to make the most of the festive season and enjoy a special Christmas, even if you can't be with your kids on Christmas Day:

Plan to do something on the day that doesn't involve children

Being with lots of children running round, even if they are your nephews and nieces will make you upset and make you miss your children more. Look up some old friends who don't have children and arrange to have a grownups day where you help cook a good meal and relax with your friends or partner. If you want to do something really different and challenging, see if you can arrange to help out in a soup kitchen or in a city homeless centre.

Think of the future

As your kids get older, there will come a time when they will spend Christmas Day with you. Remember that your children will spend most of their lives as adults and then they will be able to choose where they go for Christmas.

Agree to ring them on Christmas day to say Happy Christmas

As a parent all you really want is to make sure that your children are happy and having a great time at Christmas. Show them that you want this and that they can be happy even though they are not seeing you on Christmas Day.

Make a Christmas stocking with your kids with their initial on it

Make a Christmas Stocking with your kids with their initial on it, is a lovely activity to do together, and if they take this back to their mother's house they can have it on Christmas Day and you and they will know there is a little bit of

your Father Christmas magic in their day. Make sure that you agree this with their mother before you suggest it to your children.

Make another day your special day

You can have a second Christmas Day, but it doesn't just have to be second best Christmas Day. Make it special and different, so that it is a day to look forward to in its own right. Talk it over with your children. Together you can see the positive side of having two Christmases, like the Queen having two birthdays.

Take the kids to a pantomime or Christmas concert beforehand

This is a nice routine to set up and it is one your children will remember fondly as they grow up. If their mother has arranged to take them to a pantomime, don't compete, think of another memorable outing that you can all go on such as going to see a live band or TV show being filmed. Steer clear of visiting Santa in overcrowded shops as a last minute arrangement, that sort of event is often a real let down.

Make time to go to your kid's school

Make sure you make time to go to your children's school Christmas concert or nativity play, and if they go to church for a Christmas service, arrange to take time off work to attend.

Decorate your home and put up the tree early with your children

Get into the Christmas spirit early by playing Christmas carols or Christmas songs in the house for at least a couple of weeks before Christmas. Start a tradition that the first carol is played in your house the first time you see them in December. Then each year, your kids will look forward to those Christmassy tunes, because then they will know that Christmas is nearly here and they will associate the things you do together, with Christmas.

Negotiate extra day's either side of Christmas

Use the fact that you are not having your children on Christmas Day to negotiate an extra weekend or few days before and after the day to make up for the time, and use those days to create a real sense of Christmas spirit.

Negotiate other festive holidays in lieu

Use the fact that you are not having your children on Christmas Day to negotiate to have them over other festive holidays, such as Easter, Halloween or Thanksgiving and then make those holidays into your own family tradition.