

Christmas & the Kids

Ten ways to make Christmas work for you and the kids

By Chris Barnardo

For almost every child Christmas Day seems to be the most important day of the year. Whipped up by expectation of presents, fuelled by the media frenzy and retail marketing necessity, children look forward to Christmas from just about any time after the summer

holidays. It's no wonder then that for single parents and especially single dads the thought of not having their Children with them on Christmas Day is very upsetting and the culmination of a very difficult few months or weeks of stressful negotiations about when they're

going to have their children over the festive season. So as a divorced or separated dad how do you manage to make Christmas fun again? Here are ten tips on how to have the best Christmases with your kids:

Don't make it all about the big day

Remember that the 25th of December is just one day; it's just a date. Whether or not you're seeing your children on Christmas Day this year, don't focus completely on the day itself and make it stand for more than it should. Make this year your opportunity to spread the fun out over the whole holiday. Look back to when you were a kid; what are the things you remember about Christmas? The run up to the end of school term; the school play; sending cards to your school friends with the classroom post box; Christmas carols playing in the house; pretty lights in the high street; the shops all decked out with Christmas decorations; putting up the tree, and seeing presents under it, or the first snow fall... these things are all a big part of most people's memories about Christmas, and at least as important as the day itself, and it is these things that you can be a big part of in your children's eyes even if your children don't live with you. Being an important part of your children's Christmas is more than about spending Christmas day with them.

Share the day; if possible agree with your ex-partner to alternate Christmases

If that means not having your children for Christmas Day this year, accept that, but suggest now that you alternate, and therefore arrange now to have them next year.

Negotiate early

Focus on the goodwill element of Christmas, remember that your ex-partner will have family

that they have to visit with the children, and during the school holidays they may have to arrange childcare, so be flexible and considerate when planning out the days that the children are going to spend with you.

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

Kids like routine and even a special Christmas routine that comes around only once a year, is still something to rely on and cherish. Routines need a few times to become established, but you can make a great start by making something nice for your kids to keep from Christmas to Christmas, such as a Christmas stocking. Buy fleecy fabric with your kids (it can be cut without fraying) about a month before Christmas to make the stocking and their initial. Trim the top of the stocking with white fake fur, just like Santa's boot top. Using either a glue gun or a sewing machine, make the stocking with your kids doing most of the making. Make it durable so that it will last. Let them take their Christmas stocking wherever they spend Christmas Eve so that over the years, the kids will look forward to getting out their stocking, and wherever they are a little bit of you will be with them.

Focus on what you know will make it a happy time for your children

Whether your children are with you or not, you want them to have a wonderful Christmas. Don't make Christmas a difficult time where rows over access and bad feelings spoil it for them.

If the kids are with you this Christmas, spend time with them

It sounds obvious, but Christmas can become a holiday spent in the car going from one place to another, visiting various family members, and entertaining a stream of family and friends. Plan only one trip out, or invite close family round to yours and ask them to bring a meal course so that you don't end up doing all the catering. Plan a walk to the park with your kids to get some fresh air, but whatever you do make certain that you spend the time being with and playing with your children.

Plan the Christmas meal

If your kids are coming to you for Christmas Day and you've never cooked a Christmas dinner before, the first time you have your kids for Christmas isn't the best time to start. Your options are:

- Practice with a few roast chicken dinners now. Don't get the biggest turkey on the day and treat it like another roast dinner.
- Buy ready prepared roast potatoes, ready cut up frozen vegetables and a easy cook turkey joint (with cooking instructions). Get loads of the trimmings, like cranberry jelly, stuffing and bread sauce ready-made, so that all you have to do is microwave, open and serve.
- Remember crackers, party poppers and special napkins, the Christmas table dressing is as much part of the experience as eating the food.
- Arrange to go to your parents or your family and let them cook the meal offering to take a pudding or other dish to help.

Go easy on the alcohol it could make you maudlin or grumpy

You should never drink too much alcohol you're in charge of your children, it's dangerous. At Christmas alcohol can flow freely, but watch what you drink, alcohol is a depressant and can make you feel sad, making it hard for you to look after your children and spoiling the day for them.

Don't overcompensate with big presents

Don't compete with your ex-partner to buy the biggest present. If possible talk to your ex-partner to find out what they are getting for your children and tell them what you plan to get, so that you

don't double up. Get things that you know your children will like and value. Quirky, creative gifts that are picked because you know they really suit their character are much better than expensive presents that are bought just because they cost a lot.

Be generous with your ex-partner, send a Christmas card

It is the season of goodwill, Christmas is a good excuse to build bridges that will make future negotiations easier. Don't carry resentment; it only hurts you in the long run. Send your ex-partner a simple Christmas card. Make sure that your children have presents to give their mother, it might be tough taking them shopping for presents for your ex-partner, but remember that they love their mother and need to be able to give something at Christmas and they won't be able to buy things without your help.