

How to Communicate with Your Ex Over the Holidays



By Amy Osmond Cook, Ph.D.

Reese Witherspoon is my favorite actress. Not only is she a beautiful woman and a classy mom, but she also starred in *Legally Blonde*, a girl-power movie that I watched every day (I kid you not!) for the first three months after my divorce. I cried when Warner dumped Elle and cried again when Elle emerged triumphant at Harvard. I kept thinking, "If Elle Woods can do it, so can I." So this year, I am cheering for Reese. She has moved on from what she called a "humiliating" and "isolating" divorce (*Elle Magazine*, April 2009) and has found happiness with Jim Toth and a peaceable relationship with her ex, Ryan Phillippe.

While it sounds like Reese has got it all together, she may have a little bit of anxiety as she and Jim manage their special occasions together for the first time. As a divorced and remarried mother of five children, I know what it's like to try to manage innumerable family get-togethers over the holidays. There are too many schedules, too many conflicts, and (let's face it) too many cookies. So, for what it's worth, here are my suggestions for surviving the holidays with a newly blended family:

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Give your ex a present. Yep, a real one. His old razor that he left behind or a picture of the children that he doesn't visit often enough don't count. The other day, my ex complimented my son, Jake, on his new orange SkullCandy headphones as he was picking him up for the weekend. I had accidentally bought two pair, so I gave Jake's dad one for his approaching birthday. In the eight years that we have been divorced, I don't think I have ever seen him more excited. He has smiled more lately, and I swear it's because of the headphones.

Buy presents together. When it comes to holiday presents, is so tempting to compete with your ex. I admit I have asked the question, "What did your dad get you for Christmas?" with the secret hope that my present was better than his. But there are two reasons to give your children joint presents. First, it is a symbol of solidarity and communicates to your children that you and your ex are united in your parenting endeavors (even if you're not). Kids need to feel loved by both parents, and a joint gift communicates that effectively. Secondly, gifts become increasingly expensive as children age. They want iPods instead of Barbies. If you can swing a joint present, you can give your kids what they *really* want without spending too much money.

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Know your limits. When I was divorced and single, it was sometimes difficult to see married couples enjoying their lives. This was especially true during the holidays. I tried to focus on the things I could enjoy, but when it got too hard, I left. I could do parties, but not dates with couples.

I enjoyed Christmas with the family, but not New Years' Eve (banging pots at midnight with toddlers—Nuff said). And I never held babies, because if I did, then I wanted one—but not without a husband. As Reese aptly told *Marie Claire*, divorce is “really, really stressful” (October 2011), and it's okay to flee the scene when the stress starts to mount.

Celebrate the holidays . . . whenever. Who says Christmas has to be December 25? When the holidays get crazy, flexibility is truly a virtue. For example, this year my family is celebrating Christmas on December 23, so we can celebrate it with everyone. My kids love it, because they get two Christmases instead of one and don't have to feel left out of one family's traditions. If you can change the family party so your kids can be there, do it. If you can't, then create a few traditions that they can look forward to before or after the holiday.

The combination of exes, children, and the holidays can be as distasteful as a cup of wassail gone bad. But if you are flexible, know your limits, and reach out to your ex, you might find yourself tolerating—and even enjoying—the holiday season.

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