

Reading 1: Children of Divorce and the Holidays: a Stressful Time

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Do you know a child of divorce? Maybe you are divorced and you have children. Maybe you have a young relative or a young neighbor whose parents are divorced. Maybe your child has a friend whose parents are divorced. The holidays can be stressful and chaotic for a young person who must navigate between the two—often shockingly different—worlds of their parents. As a child of divorce myself, I thought it might be helpful to share some thoughts so that readers can understand what these children go through during the holidays.

Sometimes holiday stress can manifest in anger, combativeness, tears, sadness, stubbornness, withdrawal... all of which may seem inappropriate or unjustified to an untrained observer. People might wonder, "Why is this child acting out?" If you know a child of divorce, please be sensitive to their feelings during the holidays. The holidays may serve as a magnifying glass as to how broken their family feels to them. For example, they might feel very divided. They might not know how to talk about the division they feel. Whether real or imagined, they might not feel like they have permission to talk about it. In point of fact, they might not have permission to talk about it.

Here are some situations that the child of divorce must navigate every holiday season:

- If it's a gift giving holiday, each parent might not think to help the child buy a gift or card for the other parent (same for birthdays). The child might feel distressed that he/she has nothing to give to the parents. The parents might reply with, "It's OK—I don't need a gift," but this isn't helpful. Any normal child will WANT to give a gift to their parents on a gift giving occasion. That desire should be respected, but it might not be. If there are step or half siblings who do receive such help, it feels very unfair to the child of divorce.
- The child of divorce wants to spend the holidays with both parents in the same home. Having to choose between them is painful.
- If there are step or half siblings, the holidays may serve as a certain kind of trigger. The step or half siblings will be spending more time with a parent (depending on the particular "structure" of the family) than the child of divorce does. This may fuel hidden resentment in the child of divorce.

Notes

Please write any comments or questions for discussion here.

- Similarly, each parent may not want to incorporate the child's other half of the family into the holiday. If this is the case, the child has to hide the other half when around that parent. This is painful in its own right, but can be made worse if there are step or half siblings whose whole families ARE incorporated into the holiday. Those kids don't have to hide anything, and their whole families are loved and accepted.
- The child of divorce might have to travel alone on a major holiday to visit (or return to) a parent. There might be travel delays while en route. This means the child will spend time among complete strangers on a major holiday, and the amount of time might take up most of the day.

These are problems in their own right, and should be handled sensitively and with a lot of open communication. The child should be allowed to be completely honest with his/her feelings. Please avoid "happy talk." "Happy talk" is when people say things like this: "The kids will be fine if the adults are happy," "Kids are resilient," and so forth. These kinds of statements are like salt in the wound for the child of divorce. Instead, when you engage in an open dialog with this child, expect to hear things like, "I feel angry," "It is unfair," and "I feel left out."

The presence of step or half siblings can exacerbate these problems. These children often live under a different set of rules than the child of divorce. When one sibling (or set of siblings) lives under one set of rules, and another sibling (or set of siblings) lives under a strikingly different set of rules, you can imagine how unfair and unjust it must feel. Also, the divorced parents themselves, as children, may have lived in an intact family, and their parents may still be married. This means that they have never experienced the unequal set of rules they are now requiring their children to live under. Living in unjust and unequal circumstances on a daily basis can make a person feel like they are going crazy, and this may explain why the child of divorce acts out.

If the divorced parents tried to incorporate each other into each other's lives, this inequality could be reduced. This will obviously be difficult—they divorced each other, after all. However, they didn't divorce their child(ren). Pretending that each other does not exist, or openly undermining or despising the other, tears the child of divorce into two pieces, metaphorically of course. It's a difficult situation, one that the child of divorce has to navigate alone oftentimes. It can be an isolating experience, one that lasts for years if not decades. So even though this post may seem to apply only to young children, it actually can apply to anybody whose parents are divorced. It especially applies to anybody of any age, whose parents divorced when the person was a minor child.

If you know a child of divorce, and especially if this child is acting inappropriately, we hope this provides a small window into what this child endures during the holidays.