

KIDS TALK: The holidays and divorce

By Ann Hines

Growing Up in Santa Cruz

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It's November and the holiday season is upon us. Thanksgiving, Hanukkah and Christmas conjure up scents of yummy feasts simmering in the oven and images of grand, intact families encircling the holiday table, celebrating together. Yet, with almost half of this country's marriages ending in divorce, there are now so many variations on this traditional theme.

Over the past month, I've heard from many students about their own experiences in families with divorced parents. I asked them what they thought divorced parents could do to make holidays easier for their children. Kids are the real experts. They have not read the research, yet they validate what the adult experts tell us.

Eliot, an 18-year old freshman at UC Santa Barbara, has lots of memories and insight. He says, "When your family is not together, it brings up some jealousy to see holiday TV shows of families all together." Fortunately, many entertainment companies are becoming more sensitive to today's realities and our making holiday programs that show kids with divorced parents and stepfamilies. The good movies acknowledge the difficult issues and highlight family members joy, as they love each other in spite of it all. When Eliot was younger, his parents shared custody and he lived part-time with each parent. He remembers that the day he changed houses, he felt very uncomfortable all day. It was a feeling he kept inside and unspoken. He loved both his parents, but the change between what felt like two totally different worlds was unsettling. Because our culture focuses on being together during the holidays, Eliot felt even more uncomfortable at those times. When he was little, he wondered why Santa had different wrapping paper at the two houses and why there were sometimes cooler presents at one house. He remembers the guilt he felt when he had those thoughts: perhaps he was not being appreciative enough?

Eliot's family chose to have him split the holidays. He alternately spent every other Thanksgiving with each parent and split Christmas eve and Christmas day between Mom and Dad. He remembers the internal conflict he felt because he both enjoyed Thanksgiving, and missed the other half of his extended family. He remembers wanting to be in just one place for Christmas eve and Christmas day. One year, when he visited his extended family and saw many generations of intact families celebrating together and "it felt like how Christmas should be."

He says, "I remember when everything calmed down and we all had Christmas together. That was really important to me."

"But, I want to tell parents this: Don't do it if you might end up fighting and make it a really miserable time for your kids. And be sure you're not giving them false hope that you are getting back together."

Eliot has some recommendations for parents in the same boat. He says, "Don't ask the child to choose which house to go to for the holidays, that makes them feel guilty. The parents should do that."

"Don't compete through gifts. Here's a funny thing I thought of: Presents don't make up for a lack of presence. Sometimes parents who don't see their kids much buy humongous

presents to compensate. It just sets up conflict within the child who says to himself, 'their presents are better so they must be better.'

In fact, all of the research shows that the most destructive things for children of divorce is to be pressured, overtly or covertly, to choose sides. Even though the parents are divorced, children know that they have characteristics from each parent. Pressuring a child to choose sides is like asking them to favor or to look down upon half of themselves.

A twelve-year old boy from the Santa Cruz area wishes the holidays were a "bigger deal" with his family. It seems to him that, in his neighborhood, every kid has both parents together and seemed pretty happy.

"It does bring up jealousy and boredom. I go outside, but I don't want people to say, 'Oh, look at that kid, he's not with his family, he's not cool.' No one ever said that, but that's how it feels. So I just stay inside and I'm silent.

If I could make it better, I'd ask my parents just to do things with me, like going to a movie or a park.

It feels like my step-mom does all the fun things I used to do with my Dad and I wish we still did them."

This twelve year old's recommendation is echoed over and over by many kids: "I want to tell parents, don't trash-talk the one parent to the kids. It doesn't help us in any way; it just makes us nervous. Don't use us as a weapon." A thirteen-year-old says that he's adjusted all right to his parent's divorce. He thinks it's because they're good about keeping fights away from him and they're polite to each other in front of him. He says, "Everyone was treating me all sensitive in the beginning, but I'm okay. Maybe that is why."

A common theme runs through many of these boy's comments: They want their Dad's to be sure they spend quality time with them, especially during the holidays.

One eleven year old relishes the time he spends going to work with his dad. Another isn't thrilled that his dad, who owns his own business, seems to work constantly. He says, "If you're the boss, get your manager to help! If the toilets are clogged can't someone else unclog them, so you can be with me?"

A twelve-year-old girl from Santa Cruz talks about divided loyalties. She says, "Some people at school ask me, "Who do you like better, your step-dad or your real dad?" It makes me feel like I have to choose one of them. Sometimes the step-dad can actually be more there for the kids in real life. So I say, "You know, you can have more than one dad." I do want to see my real dad during the holidays, but he travels a lot, so sometimes I can't. When he's here, we're all together during some holidays because the divorce happened a long time ago. If I'm lucky there are no awkward feelings. When they get into disagreements, I feel like I did it. Then I want to come in my room and not come out. I really like it when they can control themselves and we can be altogether during the holidays because that makes me feel like a real kid- like, you know, the ones that have their whole family together.

She continues, "If my dad can't be with me on a holiday, sometimes I feel - he's gone, he must not want to be with me. But then I tell myself, his work is fun for him and I put how I feel behind me and think about him. But, I would say to parents who can't be there: tell your kid, "I'll always be there, I'll always love you and you can always come to me."

An articulate ten-year old wants parents to remember that love doesn't always mean buying things around the holidays. It means snuggles, hugs, kisses and saying 'I love you over and over.' What I love about both my parents is they always show their appreciation for me and for the special things I do around the holidays. She goes on, "If your kids need a good cry, you should remember that's good for a couple of reasons: If they try to ignore the divorce, that's bad, the feelings will build up inside them. A good cry gets the bad feelings out and you feel much better!"

"I think my parents must have a better divorce than others I hear about because they try not to fight in front of me and they don't ignore me." Her situation seems easier to her because one parent celebrates Hanukah and one celebrates Christmas, she says, "Parents should be sure to allow children to call the parent they're not with and hopefully to spend at least one hour of the day with them. Remember, they need both parents."

You've heard it said that the bonds that bind family members together are strong. Through my talks with kids and young adults whose parents are divorced, it has become very clear that family love transcends traditional pictures.

However their families gather around that holiday table, kids want them to know that sometimes it's more important to get along than to be right. When we do that, our kids feel important, honored and loved by both of their parents.

What greater holiday joy is there than that?

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