

## Dealing With Your Ex on Special Occasions

How to Be Together on Your Kids' Special Days After You've Split Up

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WebMD Feature

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Getting along with your former spouse or partner may be impossible at times, but if you have kids, there are going to be birthdays, holidays, graduations, weddings, and other occasions when the two of you will have to be together. No matter how old your kids are, they're going to be happier if you both can get along on their special days.

### Early Days

The first year after a separation is always the hardest, says psychologist Shirley Thomas, PhD, author of *Two Happy Homes: A Working Guide for Parents & Stepparents after Divorce and Remarriage*.

"All family members are [grieving](#)," Thomas says. "It's unavoidable."

Younger children are especially vulnerable. For them, Thomas says, it might be best to consider sticking -- as much as possible -- with the family's established routine during the first holiday season that you're apart.

"Small children won't comprehend why things are different," Thomas says. "Consider limiting the hours you are together but still spend time together if possible. As you develop new patterns of celebrating, you want your child to realize that although things are different, they can still be happy."

Emotions -- anger, sadness, bitterness -- will inevitably run high over the course of those first holidays. One good way to keep them in check, Thomas says, is to make a plan and stick to it. Decide in advance how long you are going to stay, for example, and leave when you agreed to depart.

"You are going to be vulnerable," she says. "Avoid spontaneity."

And consider avoiding alcohol, Thomas adds.

"There's usually more drinking, more alcohol around the holidays," she says. "Limit how much you drink; otherwise, you might be less inclined to hold back."

Once you're through that first year, she says, you can start to establish new ways of celebrating birthdays, Thanksgiving, and other holidays.

For some parents, though, being together always brings out the worst in one or both of them. It's important to recognize whether you and your former partner fall into that category. If you do, getting together may spoil the day for your children.

"Self-awareness is very important. A lot of parents have it but all too many don't," says psychologist Philip M. Stahl, PhD, author of *Parenting after Divorce: Resolving Conflicts and Meeting Your Children's Needs*. "Some parents for whatever reason remain in high conflict, and that's not good for the kids. Are they parents who can't be in the same place with each other? If so, they're probably better off not getting together."

### **Best Behavior**

If you are both going to attend an event, it is crucial that your children see that the two of you can get along. Thomas suggests that you look at your ex as a co-worker and treat him or her accordingly.

### **Best Behavior continued...**

"It should be a business relationship that you strive for," she says. "Think of the way you relate to a co-worker: you are friendly, kind, and validating, but you don't hug and you are not intimate. Mothers and fathers who are separated should not hug or kiss -- that is not part of a business relationship."

Stahl agrees. Even if you feel perfectly at ease with your former partner, signs of [intimacy](#) can be misinterpreted by children.

"You should be civil and warm when appropriate," he says. "Anything else would only confuse your kids."

Thomas says that simply smiling at each other, making eye contact, and saying a quick hello is enough to demonstrate to the kids that you can be civil to one another. After you've made your pleasantries, it's OK to move to the opposite side of the room.

### **Irreconcilable Differences**

So, what do you do if you and your ex can't stand to be around each other? Learn to take turns, Stahl says. For example, if mom goes to this week's Little League game, then dad will go to the next.

"If you can take turns, then you will only have to be together for major events," Stahl says.

For those, you may have to ask for help. If your child is celebrating a Bar or Bat Mitzvah or a First Communion, Stahl recommends that you talk to the rabbi or priest about how you can both be a part of the ceremony and avoid coming to blows.

And remember: just because you are both present for your child's celebration, you don't have to sit together. In fact, Thomas says it is better for your children to see you separate but happy rather than together and miserable.

"At a graduation, for instance, it's good for the kids to have to wave in one direction for mom and another for dad so that they see happy faces in both directions," Thomas says. "It reminds them that while they may have two homes, they have one family."