

A Blended Family Christmas

By Dr. Serena Patterson and Monika Grünberg, RCC

Charlie and Cynthia[1] were looking forward to their first holiday season together, a “real family”. Cynthia’s children, Max (8) and George (6) had brought out the cherished family ornaments, and planned every minute of the holiday. Charlie’s girls would be arriving on Boxing Day. Everything seemed perfect, until Cynthia brought up the subject of beds.

“No way am I sleeping with Max!” protested George. “It’s my room! Let somebody else give up their bedroom! I didn’t ask any girls to come here!” Suddenly, both children seemed to explode with resentments. By the end of the evening, Max declared that he hated Christmas, and the adults were silently agreeing with him.

Holiday seasons pose unique challenges to blended families. On the one hand, they are a chance to experience again a secure and happy family where, after many sorrows and losses, healing can begin. On the other hand, they can be, especially for children, times of silent grieving for the family of the past. Children may remember wonderful, or terrible Christmases from before the divorce. The decorations, lights, music and especially the movies of Christmas promise “magic”. But children and adults may be anxious about whether it will be good enough, “magic” enough, or whether it will be disappointing.

There are things that adults can do to help the blended family Christmas go better. Monika Grünberg, a child and family therapist in the Comox Valley, says that a shift in expectations and some realistic planning can go a long way toward creating new holiday traditions.

“First,” says Grünberg, “think about how your children handle stress, and make sure to plan in plenty of time for them to unwind. Most children need to have alone time during the holidays, whether that be quiet with a book or on their own at the skating rink zooming around and around. Family “togetherness” needs to have space for individuals to assert themselves. Perhaps plan more than one activity, like a craft in the kitchen and a video in the family room, to happen at the same time. Visiting children who don’t have their own rooms in the house, especially need some space where they can get away from the crowd for awhile, and where they can stash their treasures in private. The “in house” children may have special things that will be too difficult to share with visitors. An understanding parent can plan with them to store such treasures safely away, where they won’t tempt conflict.

Children love routines, and Christmas traditions become, for them, a script of how things are “supposed to be” every year. But new family members bring their own traditions, and parents often want to start some new routines. All of this can add up to too many traditions, with too little time or money to carry them out. Where to start? “First, the adults need to talk, to establish an overall plan and set limits on spending,” says Grünberg. “Then each parent talks with their children, to set priorities for what is most important, and what is negotiable. Then, the whole family might be ready to meet. Have some good suggestions ready, and try to blend some of each family’s favorite things with some brand new things.”



Equality is very important to children. On the day of present opening, each child should have the about the same number and value of gifts to open. If sharing children means having two “Christmases”, be sure that this rule is followed at each gathering. Grandparents and other family members may consider either providing a gift for each child, including the “new” children, or choosing one special family gift. Games, puzzles, building sets, coffee table books, movie passes and activity passes, all make good family gifts because they span wide age ranges. Sleeping arrangements should also reflect the equality rule. If each child cannot have a bed of their own over the holiday, consider having all of the children share the floor, slumber-party style. Offer some coaching and support to extended family members who may not know how to reach out to the new children; a word or two on what each child’s interest and hobbies are may go a very long way. This information might go out in a family Christmas letter, which, of course, should say something good about each child.

Finally, be sure to plan some way for your family to reach out to the wider world in a giving way. Do some volunteer work, put together a Christmas hamper, visit elders, or make a charitable contribution and read together about the place or the program that you helped. This will help children and teens to see their own troubles, and riches, in perspective. It will also help to start one of the best lifelong traditions of all; caring about and helping others.

[1] Charlie and Cynthia are fictional composites of clients, not real people.

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