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Find the True Meaning of Christmas: by Spending Time Together

By Diane Claytor

If only the holidays were like those portrayed on television commercials: happy families in their matching pajamas joyfully opening beautifully wrapped gifts around a brightly lit Christmas tree; or large, extended families sitting around an elegantly decorated dining table, feasting on that perfectly cooked turkey or ham, laughing and lovingly sharing wonderful stories. Unfortunately, for most of us, the holidays are nothing like that. They're often stressful, complicated, exhausting and even sad.

Whether it's baking the best cookies, finding the just-right gift or sharing the day with that uncle you never liked, the holidays can be far more difficult than expected. And if your family is split due to divorce or separation, the time can be even more stressful, particularly when children are involved. Decisions must be made: where, how and when will the children celebrate with each parent; how will you make it to see all the grandparents, especially when so many miles separate each set.

With all the demands, complications and craziness, perhaps it's time to stop and ask one very important question suggests Lee Marchesani, a licensed marriage and family therapist: How much are we really enjoying the holiday season? The answer may be eye-opening and may be just the impetus needed to make some changes.

"Instead of thinking 'I've got to drive here and cook this and buy that and take the kids to this,'" Marchesani says, think about ways to get off the merry-go-round. "Think about what's really important and how can that be shared with your children. The main purpose of the holidays is really just being together," Marchesani says.

"We have to be more in the moment," the Orinda therapist continues. And that often takes a real conscious effort, she acknowledges. "It may require standing in front of the mirror," asking yourself what the holidays really mean and allowing yourself to not feel pressured to do everything. The time that we spend together is what really matters, Marchesani notes.

"Times when families are together, not running around, those are the beautiful moments of connection and making memories." You may have to deliberately build those times into your schedule, agreeing that for a specific time, "we're just going to be us, together," she says. But it can – and should – be done.

The message we get from all those ads is that we must create the perfect holiday. But what is that? Marchesani asks. "The perfect holiday is about being with one another. It's not about the perfect gingerbread house or the flawless meal."

Harder for Separated or Divorced Families

For divorced families, the stress can be far greater. Sharing the holiday with an ex-spouse can be filled with both anxiety and sadness. Marchesani suggests starting the holiday planning with your ex-partner as early as possible and letting your children know what the plans are.

"The closer we get to the holidays, the more heightened our emotions become," she says. Communication can often break down between parents. Remember that this is about the children and make every effort to keep any resentment or anger out of the mix. "If there's anything formerly married parents can do together for the sake of their children, I encourage it," Marchesani says. "We need to make it less stressful on the kids. If mom has the kids Christmas morning, maybe invite dad over to watch them open gifts. Then it's about the children, not about the adults."

When sending the kids off to be with their other parent, Marchesani emphasizes the importance of giving them permission to not worry and enjoy their time away. "Be sure to tell them to have a great time and that you can't wait to hear all about it when they get back," she says. And reassure them that you, too, have plans and will be fine while they're gone. The important thing is minimizing any stress the children may feel.

It's Just a Date

Another suggestion Marchesani has for split families: think outside the box. "We get so hung up on the specific date," she explains. "It's just a date. So what if we celebrate together on Dec. 23 or Dec. 26. What's really important here? Is it the date or being together?" she asks, adding that enjoying each other on whatever day works best. "Believe me," Marchesani assures, "the kids don't care what day they open their presents."

If there are certain customs you had as a family before the separation, Marchesani recommends that, for the sake of the children, you continue them as a single parent. "And then craft new ones," she adds. "Be creative, get input from the kids. That let them own it and makes the new tradition feel special." As families change, new rituals will emerge.

As the years go on, the holidays will inevitably change. Children grow up, go off on their own and create their own traditions; parents divorce and remarry; new children enter the picture; grandparents pass away. Families grow and shrink. But the important thing remains, Marchesani says. And that's remembering what the holidays are really about: spending quality time with those we love.



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Five-months-old Moraga resident Raymond gets his first photo with Santa!
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