Holidays Increase Pressure on Children in Changing Families

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Holidays Increase Pressure on Children in Changing Families

ORONO, Maine -- Holidays center on family and traditions, but when families change, so do the traditions. For children caught in the middle of an expanding web of households, the pressure can take the fun out of holidays and turn anticipation to dread. The key to easing the tension is honest and positive communication, says a University of Maine professor.

Regardless of the circumstances, when parents divorce or remarry, children are confronted with new people, problems and feelings to deal with, says Dorothy Breen, associate professor of counselor education. "Holidays and the pressure to spend time in different places are hard for everyone, but particularly for children trying to sort out all the dynamics of adult relationships."

Statistics reflect the scope of the shifting American family. More than 50 percent of the children born in the United States today will live in divorced families before they are 18; 50 percent of these divorced families will remarry, and 40 percent of the m will divorce again. Twenty-five percent of U.S. children will be part of a remarried family.

As a result of multiple divorces and remarriages, children can have a whole line of grandparents as well as parents, and step- and half-siblings in their lives. That's a lot of adults and other children to please, notes Breen.

Divorce and remarriage both involve huge transitions for everyone, according to Breen who says it takes at least two years for a stepfamily to adjust, and the divorce rate during that period is very high.

"Just because a group of people have formed another two-parent family doesn't mean everything is fine. Nothing remains the same," she says. "There are different styles of parenting, rules, roles, responsibilities and traditions." And too often, she says, the adults become preoccupied with the adjustments and forget the tremendous impact such changes have on the children involved. It's particularly difficult during the holidays when everyone feels extra pressure. For instance:

- As members of many households, pressured to spend time with and appeal to a variety of people, children have little time to relax, play or just enjoy the holidays and their gifts.

- Gift-giving and receiving can be strained when the value of gifts from biological and step-parents and grandparents vary from child to child.
• Traditions come and go as families change and mingle, often leaving children without an identifiable, meaningful observance for the holidays.

• New spouses juggling for a niche and attention can take over a child's responsibilities and traditions around the house, making him or her feel unneeded.

• Younger children tend to blame themselves for the break-up of a family, so they have a burden of guilt as well as other stresses related to family transitions.

The most important thing is to allow children to talk about the changes that are taking place, Breen advises. Give them the opportunity to express their feelings, sort out their thoughts, and to ask questions about why their family is like it is. The answers can be simple, Breen says. "The goal is to help the children understand and adjust to the changes." She also suggests:

• Help children feel more a part of the new routine by allowing them to include something from their own traditions. Meal planning is a good opportunity. Involve them in creating rather than imposing a new tradition.

• Allow children to talk about the gifts they received and activities they engaged in with other family members they are visiting over the holidays. Children often feel that if they have a good time with one parent, it will hurt the other's feeling. Let them know they can love and show happiness with both parents.

• Any bitterness over the break-up of a family should be kept between the parents. Don't put children in the awkward position of taking sides.

• Different households have different rules. Visiting a non-custodial parent for a carefree, anything goes weekend, then coming home to routine and responsibility can cause friction. Children need to know that rules and expectations may be different in each home. Parents should refrain from criticizing each other while helping children understand the differences.

• Educators play an important role in children's lives and should be sensitive to the diversity of family structures represented in their classrooms. The diversity becomes apparent in classroom activities, such as making greeting cards for family members. School routine and support provide needed consistency when families are changing.

The changes families go through have varied financial, social, personal and school performance implications that may be more obvious during the holidays. But regardless of the time of year, children's adjustment will be easier if their thoughts and concerns are sought and respected and their questions are answered with candor and clarity, says Breen.

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