

# Holiday co-parenting after separation or divorce: 6 legal and practical tips for surviving and thriving

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The approaching holiday season will be the first post-split for Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Sophie Grégoire, who [separated in](#)

[summer 2023](#). It may also be the first for you.

Welcome to co-parenting, an increasingly common social reality. Every year, there are about [50,000 divorces across Canada](#), and most of those involve [children](#).

Annually, thousands of Canadian families join a growing group: divorced or separated co-parents who have to collaborate about parenting through the [holiday season](#). This situation is increasingly our new national normal, but that does not mean it isn't hard.

Whatever you celebrate, as the [holiday](#) season approaches, like many parents, you likely experience [holiday stress](#) as well as festive feelings.

Holiday traditions involve expectations that can be especially challenging for parents post-divorce or post-separation. I don't know anyone whose winter wonderland holiday fantasy involved being divorced. Then again, usually, the holiday season just before separation was filled with conflict, and you now face the potential of a more peaceful reality.

However, while separation can help reduce household conflict, it can also lead to new forms of battle. [Family courts across the country are backlogged](#), affected both by delays following pandemic closures and a shortage of staff and judges. This means they are especially full of urgent court proceedings as the festive season approaches.

Proactive planning can help prevent our families from adding to the backlog in the family courts. It can also keep your money in your own holiday present budget and out of the pockets of lawyers like me.

## **Co-parenting is now a post-separation norm**

While it was exceptional when I started practicing law 20 years ago, co-

parenting is now the post-separation norm.

[About 25 to 30 percent of Canadian children are growing up in separated or divorced households](#), and more when non-marital cohabitants are considered, meaning the stats only show the tip of the iceberg of households where there is a lone parent or a blended family and no legally formalized marriage.

A majority of today's separated or divorced parents are in a shared parenting situation. The Divorce Act was [amended in 2019](#) to underscore the desirability of co-parenting. The changes encourage the active involvement of both parents in children's lives post-separation, rather than having one "access" parent with a limited role in decision-making, and one with "custody."

Co-parenting during the holiday season can be challenging, but it is essential to prioritize our children's best interests. Research overwhelmingly shows that, contrary to stereotypes, while many children experience short-term effects like shock, anxiety or anger after parents separate or divorce, it is not the split itself but rather [high levels of conflict that are bad for children](#).

## **Uncharted territory of co-parenting**

Many Canadian children, like my four teens, have been living through co-parenting post-separation for several years. Others are new to it. Virtually all parents are walking in uncharted territory when we navigate shared parenting.

Even those of us who grew up with separated parents likely did not experience the two households that contemporary co-parenting families do. There has been a [radical shift towards increased involvement of both parents in children's lives after parents split](#).

So, as the holidays approach, it is likely useful to remind ourselves and each other of best practices. From 20 years as a practicing lawyer, several years [of academic research](#) and my own not-error-free personal experience, here are some tips to help separated co-parents ensure they look after the best interests of their children over the holidays.

**Plan ahead:** Start planning for the holidays well in advance. Establish a clear schedule and communication plan with your ex-spouse to avoid last-minute conflicts. Be clear about whether any events will be attended by both [parents](#), and be pro-active about setting boundaries that will prevent conflicts from arising. If both parties are tech adept, use [technological means—like apps—to facilitate this](#).

**Be flexible:** Be open to adjusting the schedule when necessary. Sometimes, unforeseen circumstances may arise, and it's important to be adaptable for the sake of your children.

**Respect and create traditions:** Respect each other's family traditions and beliefs. Encourage your children to appreciate the diversity of celebrations. Embrace the opportunity to create new holiday traditions and positive memories with your children.

**Share responsibilities:** Share the financial and logistical responsibilities of the holidays fairly. This includes sharing the costs of gifts, decorations and other holiday-related expenses.

**Avoid competing:** Don't compete with your co-parent for the children's affection through extravagant gifts or experiences. Instead, focus on quality time spent together. You are not an ATM. Children will remember your presence more than your presents.

**Seek support:** Be realistic. Whatever problems existed in the marriage are likely to persist in post-separation interactions. An app might not be

enough. A mediator, social worker, parenting co-ordinator or another professional such as a family law lawyer can be involved well in advance to help facilitate and co-ordinate communication so co-parenting during the holidays becomes less challenging.

Finally, beyond legal considerations, don't forget to seek support as it's needed, for both your own well-being, and as you support your children through [family](#) transition amid their regular developmental changes. Navigating separation or divorce means navigating a major life change [and related stressors](#). All [family members](#) can be involved in identifying age- and role-appropriate ways to be part of creating a positive holiday experience.

## Holidays can be merry

Co-parenting during the holidays is a new normal across Canada. Working together, we can create a positive holiday experience for our children. Children too can be involved in co-creating plans for the holidays for their contemporary families.

I am repeating this because I needed to hear it again and again: our children can thrive post-separation or divorce, and our own holiday seasons can be merry and bright.

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