Surviving Christmas 2017

A practical guide prepared for you by the team at Family Law Matters.
Tis the season

Christmas can be a stressful time for all of us. The expense of purchasing gifts, family gatherings and the expectation of everything being ‘perfect’ is often exhausting.

When you are separated the challenges of Christmas are heightened. On top of all the general Christmas hype you need to navigate your way through parenting arrangements, negotiating holidays and meeting the expectations of your children and extended family.

The team at Family Law Matters (along with some expert contributors) have put together this practical information booklet to help you on your journey through the holiday season. Use the tips and examples in this booklet as a guide to planning and enjoying the holiday season.

We wish you much laughter and joy this Christmas. Enjoy the special moments and take time to relax and spoil yourself!

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Parenting Arrangements

When negotiating parenting arrangements many parents agree to share time in the school holidays but forget to negotiate special holidays such as Christmas. This can make Christmas time a stressful period for all involved.

Try and remember that Christmas is about making an enjoyable and memorable experience for the children. It will certainly not be in the children’s best interests to feel as if they are caught in the middle of a tug-of-war between their parents on such special occasions.

If possible, you should try and negotiate plans that work well for everyone, particularly the children. The last thing you want to do is arrange times that effectively mean the children have to rush between households and won’t get to sit down and enjoy family time, such as a special lunch, at either home.

Survival Tips

• When organising parenting arrangements always remember that Christmas is about making an enjoyable and memorable experience for the children.
• Consider where each parent plans to spend Christmas and what this means in terms of travelling for the children.
• Be mindful of any special arrangements that have been made such as family members attending for the festivities that the children may have not seen for a long time.
• Special customs and traditions that have significance for each family should be considered. For example, some families celebrate on Christmas Eve rather than Christmas Day.
Your first Christmas as a separated family

Your first Christmas as a separated family is challenging for everyone involved, especially the children. Some of the situations you may be facing this holiday season will include:

- Organising festivities with multiple families.
- Not being able to celebrate Christmas in the traditional way your children are used to.
- Purchasing gifts for the children, friends and family with a reduced income.
- Some people feel a sense of competition with the other parent as to who can give the children a ‘better’ Christmas.

Survival Tips

- It’s all about the children! Allow them the freedom to have fun without having to worry about tensions between their family.
- Try not to focus on the pain of the separation when making plans. Take a deep breath and focus on planning an enjoyable celebration for you and your children.
- Create a new tradition with your children that you can look forward to each year. Think of something fun like Christmas breakfast at the beach or opening one present two days early!

Helpful Example

An example of an arrangement that could work for Christmas time may be:

- One parent spends from 4:00pm on Christmas Eve to 4:00pm on Christmas Day allowing them to have proper time for a Christmas Lunch, and
- The other parent spends from 4:00pm on Christmas Day to 4:00pm Boxing Day.

The usual living arrangements then re-commence from 4:00pm on Boxing Day, so that the parent spending the first half of the school holidays with the children receives the children back into their care. This arrangement could then swap for the following year to ensure the children have the opportunity to experience a full and relaxed Christmas with each of their parents.
Expectations

Christmas is packed with expectations. Life isn’t perfect and our expectations can run away with us. People have different interests, customs and incomes and this can cause problems when you are managing parenting arrangements and multiple celebrations.

Christmas expectations can vary greatly between children and adults. Some situations you might relate to are:

• You want your children to enjoy Christmas for more than just the presents.
• You don’t want your children to feel upset that they can’t spend Christmas with both parents at the same time.
• Your income doesn’t allow you to buy your children the presents they want.
• You feel pressure to attend multiple events and feel uncomfortable saying ‘no’ or ‘It’s too difficult this year.’

Survival Tips

• Research shows that experiences create stronger memories and feelings of joy than ‘things’. Take the children to a Carols by Candlelight event or volunteer at a local charity to help others.
• Keep your children up to date with family and celebration plans for Christmas so they can look forward to their activities. Keep positive when talking about their visits with the other parent.
• Set the expectation early with your children on gift giving. For older children, it is often exciting to be given a ‘budget’ that they can spend on nominating their own Christmas gifts.
• Be honest and open with your extended family. If you are finding it difficult to attend all celebrations while juggling shared parenting, let your family know you are finding it challenging.
• Make an effort to enjoy yourself, even if you don’t want to be somewhere, keeping your own expectations in check will help you have a more pleasant day.
Conflict

Sometimes people just don’t get along. Existing tensions will often flare during Christmas as you spend more time with extended family and friends.

Most of us have been in one of the following situations:

• You know that during Christmas you have to interact with someone that you don’t get along with.

• You have to spend more time than usual with your ex partner which can bring to the surface feelings of resentment, hurt and frustration.

• You find that your family impose opinions on your situation that are not appropriate in front of others.

Survival Tips

• Try to be empathetic to others during the holiday season. Most of us feel some stress at Christmas, putting yourself in their shoes for a moment can help remove your own frustration.

• Avoid over indulging in food or alcohol, particularly if emotions are high. This will increase the likelihood of conflict.

• Avoid getting involved in any conflicts that happen around you during celebrations.

• Offer to help the host of the celebration so that you can have some ‘time-out’ from the festivities. Washing dishes in the kitchen can be relaxing when you are surrounded by so much activity.

• Focus on creating an enjoyable time for your children. Focus on calming yourself internally and avoid topics that you know cause tension or stress.

If you need assistance managing conflict during the Christmas season you can contact: Family Relationship Centre, Caringbah (02) 9525 6488
Don’t forget you

Christmas is busy, exciting and often fun. It can also trigger emotions such as stress, sadness and frustration. You may relate to one of these situations:

• You find attending multiple events overwhelming.

• You over commit yourself financially trying to please everyone.

• You find Christmas stressful overall.

Scenario

Lisa and Lachlan had been separated for five years. They have two children who are now 12 and 10 and had established a good routine for shared care during Christmas. Lisa always had the children on Christmas Eve and Lachlan would pick them up at 1pm on Christmas Day. For the past three years, Lisa would attend her Aunty’s Christmas Party on Christmas afternoon. She never enjoyed herself as she had already celebrated Christmas on Christmas Eve and morning with her parents and children and was exhausted by the afternoon. She had always felt obliged to attend, as this was the only time of year she saw her extended family. This year Lisa decided to put herself first. She set the expectation with her Aunty in November that this year she would be away on Christmas afternoon and would not be able to attend the party. When Lachlan picked up the children at 1pm, Lisa packed an overnight bag and went to visit her friend Georgia who lived two hours down the coast. Lisa was able to enjoy a seafood dinner with her friend and then spend a relaxing evening on the couch reading magazines. She returned home the next afternoon feeling happy knowing the children had enjoyed a fun Christmas with each of their parents, and relaxed for allowing herself some time out to enjoy the little things.

Survival Tips

• Keep it simple. Enjoy the moments of Christmas that are important to you and focus on those activities above everything else.

• Plan some ‘you-time’. Set a time that you can do something you want to do for yourself.

• Keep up your exercise routine as much as possible to keep your energy levels up.

• Spend some time being thankful for what you do have, or call a friend that may be experiencing a challenging time to give them a sounding board.
Tips for surviving financially at Christmas

Juggling the budget at Christmas time can be worrying after separation.

Many parents feel pressure to “make up for difficult times” with excessive gifts. This is not realistic and sets a standard that may not be able to be maintained again in future.

Keep positive about Christmas time and set expectations early on. Most importantly prepare a budget and stick to it. Developing good budgeting habits is important, not just for Christmas but all year round. Start by listing what you have to spend (income or savings) and then who you need to buy for. Don’t forget to allocate some funds for additional expenses that may be due at this time (regular bills, seasonal bills, extra funds for school holiday activities).

Shop with a list and cash. This will help you to be aware of the money you are spending. It’s easy to lose track with tap and go and credit cards. If you are an impulse buyer try shopping online as it removes the distractions (don’t forget to search for discount coupons in your favourite online stores to maximise savings). If you have a rewards points membership, check their online offers as Christmas is a great time to cash these in for store cards or gifts.

Young children are always impressed by quantity over quality. Large chain stores like K-mart and Target have loads of affordable items that kids love. Older kids and teens may want specific brands or expensive items. Give them a personal budget and let them make the decision on how it should be spent.

Remember to use positive language with money. Expressions like “we can’t afford that” or “money doesn’t grow on trees” will promote negativity associated to money. Use sentences like “money provides choice and now you have the choice on how you would like to spend this money”.

Remember some experiences you just can’t buy. Time together at a picnic, driving to see Christmas Lights; attending Carols by Candlelight or even volunteering together at a Soup Kitchen.

Try not to rely on credit cards but if they have been used repay them as quickly as possible. Set yourself up for next year by starting a Christmas account in January. Allocate a small amount per pay to this account and your funds will be available when next Christmas rolls around.

Expert Contributor

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Christmas has unfortunately become one of the most stressful events of the year and stress can often lead to conflict within families. So how do you negotiate and resolve conflict? I encourage negotiation of conflicts in a cooperative manner where, instead of solely pursuing your own interests, you look for solutions that are beneficial to everyone involved and focus on ensuring Christmas is a special time for your children.

If conflict escalates this Christmas, you may want to keep in mind the PAUSE principle:

- **P**repare (get the facts, seek advice, develop options)
- **A**ffirm relationships (show respect for others and focus on the children)
- **U**nderstand interests (identify others’ concerns, desires, needs, limitations, or fears)
- **S**earch for creative solutions
- **E**valuate options objectively and reasonably

If you find that you are struggling with an ongoing unresolved conflict, you may wish to consider counselling, mediation or collaboration.

Mediation is a structured and assisted negotiation that can take place with or without lawyers. With the guidance of a mediator, you and the other party identify issues, develop and evaluate options and reach your own decisions.

Collaboration differs from mediation in that all collaborative professionals (generally including a coach and lawyers) work together with you and the other party. Everyone agrees in writing not to go to court. Through a series of meetings, everyone focuses on achieving a jointly beneficial settlement for you and your children.

Both mediation and collaboration enable you to avoid court and to achieve a settlement that best meets the needs of both of you and your children.

For more information about mediation or collaboration, please contact Kirkman Family Law and don’t forget to P.A.U.S.E. and enjoy your Christmas!
It is important to understand that your children will be looking forward to spending Christmas with their other parent. While you may be struggling, your children may not be feeling the same way. Allow your children the opportunity to enjoy their time at Christmas away from you. It doesn’t mean they don’t want to be with you or that they don’t care about your feelings. The more you allow your children the freedom to enjoy their time, the happier they will be when they come back to you.

Make sure you look after yourself while your children are away. Take the time to speak with family or friends about how you are feeling. If you are still feeling emotionally overwhelmed it may be a good idea to speak to a professional about how to manage your feelings.
5 Christmas Tips for a Peaceful Divorce

1. Take your time - Don’t rush. Changing the locks on your home, cancelling credit cards and withholding children will only cause further tension and create a sense of fear in your former spouse. Take the time to let the dust settle before you make any major decisions. In most cases, nothing is that urgent.

2. Get the right advice - if you are looking to stay out of court and remain amicable with your former partner, speak to a specialist family law professional who is also collaboratively trained or open to mediation and negotiation. Don’t be too quick to enter into a war of words through lawyers.

3. Breathe and take some time for you – in times of stress (which a separation and divorce can certainly be), it is imperative that you look after you! Have a coffee with a friend, take a walk, find a hobby and don’t be afraid to say ‘No’. Learning to say ‘No’ is a skill all on its own but one that may reap enormous rewards.

4. Social media is not your friend – step away from the keyboard! Don’t write or publish anything on any social media platform about your family situation or your former partner. It will come back to bite you... and you know where!

5. Everything in moderation – listen to what your friends and family are saying, but be mindful that they might be slightly biased and protective of you and you may need to take the advice in good measure. Enjoy some Christmas spirit but don’t overindulge and make sure to enjoy the little things!