

## Divorced? Widowed?

# HOW TO GIVE YOUR CHILDREN

## THE GIFT OF LOVE THIS HOLIDAY SEASON

The holiday season after her divorce found Suzy Yehl Marta overwhelmed and almost totally unprepared. It was a traumatic time, especially for her three young sons. Their father was gone. Marta went from being a full-time, at-home mom to a single parent working three jobs just to make ends meet. Though Marta knew the divorce was the right thing to do, she hated her new life. She was joyless and angry. Then came Christmas.

"More than anything, I wanted this to be a special holiday for my sons. I wanted them to feel loved," she says. Today, Marta is president and founder of Rainbows, the nation's largest not-for-profit organization dedicated solely to helping families cope with the emotional pain of loss. Then, twenty-six years ago, she was a new single parent with few resources.

According to recent census data, 49.2% of children live in families impacted by death, divorce, separation and abandonment. For families headed by a single parent, the stresses of the holiday season can be especially painful, says Marta.

"Holidays heighten children's sense of loss," she explains. "Even if it's been years since the parent died or moved out, the child's pain can be intense this time of the year."

Yet, despite emotional and financial difficulties, parents can make the season special for their children. Marta offers these seven strategies for giving your children the holiday present they need and will treasure most: a gift of love.

### **Plan holiday celebrations.**

Losses, such as divorce, separation or death, complicate holidays and special events. Planning ahead helps, says Marta. With your children, decide how and with whom your family will observe holiday celebrations. Schedule holiday visits and get-togethers with the children in mind; they don't want to rush from one house to another.

Divide up the children's wish lists to eliminate duplicate gifts. If possible, divorced or separated parents should attend school functions together for the children's benefit. Have the children/teens send holiday cards to relatives. Include current photographs.

### **Anticipate potential difficult moments.**

Before a family gathering, make sure everyone understands that the children and family ties are the focus of the get-together. If there's bitterness because of a separation or divorce, establish clear-cut ground rules up front that prohibit name-calling, taking sides or verbal bashing of any family members.

Unfortunately, the holidays can bring disappointments to children. Their grandmother, devastated by the recent death in the family, forgets to send a gift or your former spouse fails to keep a holiday promise. Don't criticize the other person or make up excuses for the offending behavior. Instead, sit down and talk with your children.

Ask them how they feel.

Find out how they want to respond.

Some children will choose to ignore the offense.

Others might decide to write a note to the person explaining how their actions have affected them.

### **Acknowledge your loss.**

In the hustle and bustle of the season, take time to talk about the parent who has died or to discuss some of the changes that have occurred because Mom and Dad are divorced.. Ask the children how they feel and listen to what they say. Marta's advice: Encourage positive reminiscences. "You will enhance the true meaning of the season for

"You will give your children one of the best gifts ever if you rise above the situation and put their emotional needs first," says Marta. "You may be overwhelmed with negative feelings and anxieties, but don't burden your children with them. Instead, work through your problems in a heart-to-heart talk with a close friend or compassionate adult relative."

### **As a family, discuss old and new traditions.**

Healthy families change. Establishing new holiday traditions builds connections and rekindles the sense of commitment you have toward each other, says Marta. This year, talk with your children about new ways you can observe the holidays. New traditions don't have to be expensive or elaborate.

For their first Christmas alone, Marta and her sons decided to buy a live tree. To save money, they waited until late afternoon on Christmas Eve to make their purchase. The only tree they could afford was a scrawny pine with several missing limbs and a lopsided stem. Most of their ornaments were homemade or from a discount store. The kids loved it.

### **Be realistic about your capabilities.**

A single parent can't do everything. Rather than bemoan what's no longer possible, focus on the positive. Prioritize your family's needs, make choices and explain your decisions to the children. It's okay to say you don't have the energy, money or

your children and build good memories for them to enjoy in the future."

### **Be conscious of your feelings.**

Your attitude toward your former or deceased spouse sets the tone for the children. An undercurrent of animosity or anxiety will torpedo the holidays for them. Always try to see how things play out through their eyes.

enough time off from work to make six-dozen cookies, decorate a huge tree and tour the local sites. Ask the children what they want to do most; you might be surprised by their answers. "The most important memory you can give your children this holiday season is time spent together," says Marta.

### **Decide how you'll spend your free time.**

The first Christmas morning following the divorce, Marta's sons left for the day with their dad. Turning back to a house of absolute silence, Marta felt like a lost soul. For hours she sat on the couch and stared at the tree, devastated and alone.

Subsequently, Marta made sure she had plans for the time her sons were gone. One year, she served Christmas dinner at a nursing home; another, she cleaned out her closets.

