

# How not to ruin Christmas for your kids

**Advice from Timothy McMichael, New Zealand's Mediator of the Year 2017 and manager of the Family Works Resolution Service.**

**Is conflict inevitable at Christmas? If not, why does it feel like it?**

The good news is that conflict isn't inevitable! With a bit of planning and basic communication most people can avoid conflict.

If it seems conflict will be inevitable, what's often happening is that people are drawing on their own poor past experiences, and using them to make assumptions about the future. Big tip: judge each day on its own merits.

Christmas and New Year holidays are not the best time to tell your partner you're leaving them. For the sake of any kids, try not to have those conversations until closer to school starting so the kids can enjoy most of their summer holiday.

**What's best practice for creating a conflict-free Christmas?**

Try not to have too many surprises, particularly those which might not go down as you intend. Before saying something, making a decision, or even giving someone a gift, take a few moments to reflect on how the other person might respond.

**What specific advice do you have for separated parents forced to deal with ex-partners at Christmas gatherings?**

Talk about presents — agree a dollar value and try not to go above that. Don't overcompensate by buying expensive gifts for the kids as a kind of apology. Consider buying joint gifts.

Kids don't necessarily like going to two places. It's disruptive and often stops them enjoying a full day with one parent. Being dragged across town

or even driving to another city is not necessarily their idea of fun.

So consider swapping Christmas — one year with one parent, the next with the other.

When you are doing changeovers, it is probably not a good idea to bring new partners or step-parents with you in the car, particularly if you have not told the kids first.

### **What should separated parents do to help their children through potentially-fraught Christmas situations?**

Most importantly, prioritise your children. Continually ask yourself, "If I was in my kid's shoes right now, what would make the best possible Christmas for me?" And, "What would I least like to happen over the holiday period?"

However you feel about your ex-partner, don't badmouth them in front of the kids. It's cruel — almost a kind of child abuse. Children want, and need, to be able to love both parents, whatever the grown-ups think of each other.

Don't drink before any handover and — above all — talk and talk and talk in advance with your former partner, so there are no surprises for your kids, or for you. And even if your former partner doesn't keep their side of the bargain, keep your cool in front of the kids and have it out with your former partner later.

### **If prevention and conflict management doesn't work, despite all our best efforts, what do we do after things go wrong?**

Acknowledge the issue with the other person. If you can, agree to park it until the New Year. Make a commitment to revisit the issue with this person then — the issue may in any case have changed, subsided, or altered in some way, or even gone away. Time often can be the very best healer.