



FamilyLife's  
**A VERY  
BLENDED CHRISTMAS**

*Unwrapping the Gift of Peace*





# 8 Tips for a *peaceful* Stepfamily Holiday

by Gayla Grace

It's been 25 years since our first holiday season as a blended family, but I remember the tension and heartache well. Blending four young children, managing a harried schedule that included two ex-spouses, competing with the other households for time together and gift exchange, and coping with emotions on overdrive ignited a simmering blaze that burned throughout the season and left behind a trail of hurt feelings and unmet expectations.

I learned some valuable lessons that season on how to negotiate with others and compromise on details that didn't have to go my way. I resolved to take proactive steps the next time around to help relieve some of the turmoil and division. And I committed to create lasting memories and enjoy time together as a family instead of simply survive the season.

If you're aiming for a peaceful stepfamily holiday, here are a few suggestions.

## 1 ] Walk closely with Jesus.

As the curtain closes on another year, our need for the Lord's help grows. We've all walked through our own heartaches this year. And holiday months for blended families bring additional stress, tension, and confusion.

But God! You don't have to walk this road alone. Search your Bible for verses that highlight how God rescues those He loves. Here's one of my favorites: "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Psalm 73:26). Let Him be your strength this season.

## 2 ] Manage your expectations.

I wasn't prepared for the chaos and heartache that accompanied our first Christmas together. Combining different traditions and the stress of outside family members shattered my Pollyanna expectations.

The next year I came prepared. I expected tense conversations with a stepchild who yearned for the way it used to be when Mom and Dad were still married, and I didn't take things personally. I showed up early in the season to negotiate a visitation schedule with my former spouse that worked for our family. And I navigated the bumps and potholes with greater ease since my expectations looked different.

## 3 ] Recognize and respect grief.

Stepfamilies are created because of loss—the ending of a relationship from death or divorce. The grief from that loss

lingers and regardless of the time lapse, holidays can resurrect that grief. Sadness shows up or misbehavior with your kids appears when least expected. Allow grief in as part of your holiday and be mindful of the role it plays. Cry on hard days. Ask for help from those who love you. Make self-care a priority when you need it. And look to the One always ready to offer comfort (Psalm 34:18).

## 4 ] Give the gift of grace.

When your stepchild scowls at their gift or refuses to show up for that important family gathering, choose grace. You're opting to build a long-term relationship. Maybe that relationship doesn't look the way you want this year. But turning your back and giving up is the easy button. Persevering takes work. When you feel your stepchild doesn't deserve grace, consider this—we don't deserve the gift of grace God offers us, but He gives it anyway (Ephesians 2:8).



## 5 ] Be flexible.

Stepfamily routines rarely go as planned. Maybe your stepchild asks for a teacher gift at the last minute the other parent had agreed to provide. Or your name gets left off the school holiday program. Commit to do your part to maintain peace without a fuss. Be willing to make sacrifices when necessary. Christmas can be celebrated on a day other than the official holiday and still be a special day. Gift exchanges can be altered for the sake of togetherness.

## 6 ] Create memories together.

Press pause on the hustle and bustle of the season and spend time together—away from technology. Start new traditions and celebrate old ones that fit. Traditions offer a sense of belonging and cement relationships when carried out year after year.

Brainstorm with your stepchildren for ideas. Maybe it's a movie marathon night of your favorite Christmas shows with wassail and popcorn or an afternoon of baking holiday treats together with festive tunes in the background. Get creative and have fun together!

## 7 ] Consider your children's needs.

Holidays are stressful for your kids and stepkids too—especially if they're pulled between family members. Allow them the freedom to love their other parent and go to that home without a guilt trip. Help

your stepchildren buy gifts for other family members. And forego the rules of where gifts must be kept—let them take that favorite new toy with them when they leave for Mom's house. Trying to control how gifts are managed adds stress to a child and creates a barrier in your relationship.

## 8 ] Take time for date night.

Prioritizing the marriage relationship in a busy holiday schedule takes effort! But a late-night rendezvous or Saturday morning coffee date can recharge your relational battery. Make a pact to keep conversation focused on your coupleness without any mention of the kids or former spouses. And end your special time by praying together for your family.



It's likely your holiday season will include tense moments and stressful days. Don't fret. Holidays can be joyous and memorable even if they're not perfect. Rejoice on the good days. Ask Jesus for help on the hard days. And partner with your spouse to create a holiday season that celebrates the birth of a Baby who offers hope and peace to every home.

*Merry Christmas!*





# The Grief That Stole Christmas:

## 6 Reminders for Stepfamilies

by Gayla Grace

Reading the Christmas story always reminds me of the blessings we experience because of God's gift to us. But holiday seasons aren't always merry for blended families. What if, alongside those blessings, there's sadness this time of year? What if our not-so-blended relationships, outsider feelings as a stepparent, or ongoing tension in our home smother joy and leave us questioning when (or if) things will get better?

Particularly during the early years of stepfamily life, holidays have a way of resurrecting grief from divorce, death, or some other tragedy. Even if you've moved past that hard event, there's a good chance your children haven't. You might be excited about your first set of holidays together as a family, but your children or stepchildren want

to return to Christmases when Mom and Dad were still together. They might not voice their grief aloud, but their behavior will speak instead.

If you or someone in your stepfamily is grieving this holiday season, don't deny those feelings. Give yourself permission to be sad and take time for things that bring you joy. Recognize and acknowledge what your kids and stepkids are going through also. Don't expect them to stuff their sadness or anger and carry out normal traditions as usual. Be prepared for heightened emotions and unpredictable behavior. And ask God for extra doses of grace for you and your family if grief looms this year.

Here are six reminders to get you through the season.

## 1 ] Even good things can bring heartache.

After marrying in October, Randy and I plunged straight into the holiday months—oblivious as to what lay ahead with our four kids, two ex-spouses, and emotions on overdrive. I was thrilled at a second chance at matrimony after a failed marriage, but I wasn't prepared for the heartache that accompanied the unfamiliar land I had stepped into.

I had fond memories as a child of picking out just the right tree with my family, decorating it with my three sisters, joy-filled laughter, and listening to the tunes of Christmas music playing in the background. That was the glorious beginning of a new holiday season.

But our tree-searching as a blended family wasn't quite the same. We hustled to a nearby lot after work that first year with four kids in tow and a meager amount of cash. Each tree Randy pulled out for consideration was criticized and nitpicked by someone. The next lot carried the same scenario; agreeing on just the right tree seemed impossible.

Finally, we landed at the last lot in town with Randy's frustration mounting. "We have to make a decision here, kids," he said. "We've run out of choices." The decision finally came through mounds of tears and bickering. The disharmony crushed my childhood memories. And sadly, the next year, Randy encouraged we skip that tradition and buy an artificial tree. Every year following, our new tradition became pulling the tree out of the attic to decorate. I grieved my unfulfilled expectation of what the beginning of the holiday season should look like.

## 2 ] Trust God.

Despite what God had done for me previously, I complained of my current surroundings. My memory lapsed of how He walked with me through a dysfunctional marriage, a gloomy divorce, and hard single parenting years. He then provided a loving, gracious spouse for another chance at marriage.

But I acted like the Israelites in the desert who refused to trust God with their



circumstances after God delivered them from Pharaoh. Caught between the advancing Egyptian army and the raging Red Sea, they cried out in fear to Moses. “Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt?” (Exodus 14:11). They were so focused on their current hardship they forgot what God had done for them previously and didn’t trust His provision for the future.

How often we do the same. Even though God has walked with us through a muddled past, entering a hard season again as a stepfamily causes us to forget. We fail to trust He will provide for us again and instead create our own solutions that fail miserably.

God provided for the Israelites with the miraculous parting of the Red Sea. The Israelites crossed over unharmed with a wall of water on each side. Following close behind, the Egyptians drowned when the Lord swept them into the sea. God provided in ways the Israelites never anticipated, and He will do the same for us. Despite our doubts, His faithfulness never ceases.

### **3 ] Be vulnerable.**

We don’t like to show our sad self to others. Vulnerability takes courage. We have to open the curtain of our soul and allow others to see our wounds and our bruises. But if we leave the curtains closed, light can never filter in.

We find a beautiful example of a trusted friendship in Luke 1 with the Christmas story. After Mary learns she is pregnant with Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit, the angel Gabriel goes on to share another miraculous pregnancy—her relative Elizabeth. It must have been a perplexing time for Mary, but God immediately informs her of someone in a similar situation. Mary leaves to visit Elizabeth, traveling by donkey approximately eighty miles away—a long journey for a pregnant woman! We aren’t told why, but we can speculate that perhaps Mary knows Elizabeth will understand her unique situation. Mary stays with Elizabeth three months and a rich friendship follows.

We were created to be in relationship with one another. Find safe people you trust and share your story of unmet expectations, holiday struggles, or desperate attempts to trust God with circumstances you don’t like. We need the comfort a trusted friend can offer, but they have to know we’re struggling first.





#### 4 ] Cherish the good days.

Every holiday season includes good days and bad, high times and low. Embrace the good days and celebrate the season. But don't fill your calendar with obligations you might not want to take part in on the hard days. If the Sunday school gathering creates angst for you this time of year, it's okay to bow out. Or maybe the family portrait session needs to be canceled this year. Have you noticed that blended families and picture taking don't seem to mix well?

Choose your favorite holiday festivity and make time to enjoy it. My parents were married 65 years before Mom passed away. Now, at 88 years old, Dad doesn't have many days that include a pep in his step. But on his good days, he delights in spending time at a nearby lake watching the fishermen, feeding the ducks, and savoring a picnic lunch. Grief still shows up for him at the holidays, but he seeks to cherish the good days with activities that bring meaning to him.

Let your joy-filled days carry you through the sad ones this season. When you notice your stepchild having a good day, suggest a special activity or ask what they want to do to celebrate. Don't let the good days slip by without intentional effort toward a festive activity, even if it's as simple as making holiday cookies or singing a Christmas carol with those you love.



#### 5 ] Let prayer change you.

Steeped in stepfamily grief at the time, I stared at the plaque on my friend's wall, considering whether I agreed with it or not. "Prayer changes things," it said. I wanted to believe what I read, but my mind wandered to our circumstances—another holiday season marked by sadness from unmet expectations and relationships that weren't blending.

That was 24 years ago, our second holiday together as a stepfamily. Wanting a different outcome than the year before, I committed to keep my focus on Jesus and rely on His help with my challenges. I started each day with prayer and a devotion and ended each day by writing something to be thankful for on my gratitude list. And during the day, if peace wandered away, I went back to my morning devotion, talked to God, and asked for His help.

At the end of that holiday season I remember thinking, I made it without losing my temper this year. I maintained a peaceful spirit despite my grief and our not-so-perfect blended family. Thank you, Jesus.



And then I recalled the plaque. It wasn't that prayer changed things. That year, prayer changed me.

## 6 ] Look toward a new tomorrow.

Creating a new normal for holidays takes time and only happens after you've been allowed to grieve the old normal. I no longer feel sad when Randy drags the artificial tree from the attic. That became a new normal for our family. And now, as empty nesters, we can buy a real tree again—one that just the two of us have to agree on!

That's the beauty of new seasons. If you find yourself enveloped in grief this holiday season, remind yourself there's always hope for a new tomorrow. God's steadfast love and mercy through the passage of time help heal a grieving heart. There are brighter days ahead.

"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22-23).





# 13 IDEAS

## to Manage Holiday

### STEP-STRESS

by Ron Deal

“If you think your life is hectic during the holidays, you ought to try coordinating schedules, dinner plans, and Christmas gifts with the parents of three households—most of whom don’t care for each other very much.”

Stepmother Sheree was trying to explain her holiday stress to her own mother, who had never experienced stepfamily life. “Everything is just more complicated, Mom. There are so many people who influence our plans and lots of adults who don’t share the same priorities. It’s like hitting a moving target.”

The holidays are supposed to be a time when we slow down from the everyday hustle and bustle of life, spend some extra time with our children and extended family, enjoy some well-planned meals, and do a little shopping. But for the average household, the holidays mean an endless to-do list that includes parties, travel to

see extended family, decorating and putting up lights, school programs, and more.

Sheree knows these normal stressors are even more challenging given the complexity of stepfamilies.

Here are some ideas that can help you manage step-stress during the holidays:

**1 ] Plan, plan, plan.** Be proactive in discussing upcoming holiday events. A lot of stress results when families fail to plan and then play catch-up with all that needs to be done.

**2 ] Maintain simple rituals of connection throughout the holidays.** A hectic schedule can make us forget the simple things. The small, simple behaviors that families repeat on a regular basis communicate love and keep us connected even when life’s typical



schedule is disrupted. Hugs before leaving for school, a special note in a lunch box, and Friday night pizza with a family video are rituals that should be maintained when possible.

**3 ] Parent 364.** It's easy to get so caught up in the holidays that we obsess in making them "perfect." Don't forget: what really matters most to children is what happens the other 364 days a year.

**4 ] Give kids your permission to enjoy the other household.** When a mother says, "I'm thrilled you will be spending time with your dad and stepmom over Christmas; have lots of fun!" you are releasing them from guilt and worry over how you will fare during their departure.

**5 ] Be aware of loyalty and loss.** Realize that no matter how long it's been since a divorce or marriage, children struggle with feelings of loss. Being with one parent means not being with the other. Or if a parent is deceased, family traditions don't feel the same without that person's presence. Be sensitive to

children's losses and realize that mixed reactions are common. Don't punish them for sadness; listen, hug, and provide a little extra TLC to help them through.

**6 ] Honor traditions.** Maintaining old traditions can be more difficult given the shifting presence of family members. Keep the ones you can and look for ways to establish new traditions if new family members are present.

**7 ] Do what you can and accept what you cannot change.** By working on your co-parenting relationship with your ex throughout the year, your chances of respectful negotiation will improve during the holidays. But realize that you ultimately cannot control the other household and you may have to grin and bear it.

**8 ] Part-time biological parents should try to spend some exclusive time with their children.** While everyone tries to get in a little more family time during the holidays, part-time parents especially should take advantage of opportunities to spend special one-on-one time with their children.



**9 ] Be flexible and make sacrifices.** You cannot make everyone happy all the time. Accepting this truth immediately takes away the pressure to give everyone what they want. Being flexible may mean modifying an old tradition to bring an “outsider” (i.e., stepfamily member) in. For example, perhaps you will need to open gifts a day before or after Christmas in order to ease between-home transitions for children.

**10 ] Let priorities save the day.** You can't do it all so don't sweat the small stuff. Ask yourself what really matters and plan your schedule accordingly.

**11 ] Embrace your “expanded family.”** You may not have chosen all the members of your multiple-household family, but choosing to welcome, embrace, and love them is a gift to everyone—especially yourself.

**12 ] Discuss titles for family members.** New stepfamilies especially should discuss with the children how they will address other people. Find terms (like “step-uncle”) that feel appropriate to children and will be respectful to adults.

### **13 ] Gift-giving tips:**

- Stepparents and stepchildren should be encouraged to give cards and gifts to one another that feel appropriate to their relationship.
- Expect step-grandparents to be equitable in giving gifts to grandchildren and step-grandchildren.
- To avoid duplication, children can give a different wish list to each biological parent.
- Do not buy a gift together with the ex-spouse. It sets up false expectations for the children and is not healthy for the remarriage.
- Do not compete with your ex-spouse by trying to buy a “better” gift or spend more money.







# Family Gratitude

## SCAVENGER HUNT

### Supplies needed:

- Pens or pencils
- Scavenger Hunt checklist

As a family, create your own positive turn of events by opting to (literally) search for gratitude together.

We've got 30 places to find gratitude in your home right here!  
How many can you find by splitting up and looking for these for 10 minutes? (Smaller kids, bring an adult with you.)

You can't use the same object for more than one number!



1. Under a piece of furniture (ex. Cat toy ... because we have a pet!).

\_\_\_\_\_

2. On a shelf. \_\_\_\_\_

3. In your fridge. \_\_\_\_\_

4. Better when it's shared. \_\_\_\_\_

5. Older than you are. \_\_\_\_\_

6. Great to have when you want to celebrate. \_\_\_\_\_

7. A reminder of someone you love. \_\_\_\_\_

8. Outside. \_\_\_\_\_

9. Hidden. \_\_\_\_\_

10. Alive, but not human. \_\_\_\_\_

11. Hot. \_\_\_\_\_

12. Helpful for relaxing. \_\_\_\_\_

13. Something a person with less money would be grateful to have.

\_\_\_\_\_

14. Something your life would be tougher without.

\_\_\_\_\_

15. Taller than you. \_\_\_\_\_





16. Delicious. \_\_\_\_\_

17. Helpful to make you smell better. \_\_\_\_\_

18. Not just yours. \_\_\_\_\_

19. Was a thoughtful gift. \_\_\_\_\_

20. A way for you to be creative. \_\_\_\_\_

21. Helpful for making someone in your family laugh. \_\_\_\_\_

22. Sometimes complained about by you. \_\_\_\_\_

23. An object you help out with. \_\_\_\_\_

24. Helps you remember something that makes you smile.

\_\_\_\_\_

25. Keeping you safe. \_\_\_\_\_

26. Keeping you comfortable. \_\_\_\_\_

27. Making you smarter. \_\_\_\_\_

28. Perfect for helping you sleep. \_\_\_\_\_

29. Keeping you warm. \_\_\_\_\_

30. Something that reminds you God cares about you.

\_\_\_\_\_

# Not So Picture Perfect

## CHRISTMAS BINGO

Mark off the minor disasters as they happen—and choose gratitude for something instead. When you cross off an entire line, console yourself with a small reward. #ChristmasIRL

 Child picks nose during photos	 Christmas plans canceled	 Family member wardrobe malfunction	 Burned or otherwise destroyed holiday food	 Stinky attitude at holiday event
 Entire family gets sick	 Discover weird family secret	 Weather leads to personal or property injury	 Have trouble coordinating schedule for family photos	 Ex-spouse buys your kid the same gift
 Give or receive unwanted gift	 Too late to go to the store	<b>FREE SPACE:</b> name your own mishap	 Holiday dinner turns to political conversation	 Regift a present
 Child says something embarrassing at family gathering	 Tangled or dead holiday lights	 Appliance or other needed machine malfunctions	 Dumb conflict with spouse	 Arguing on the way to a holiday event/church service
 The other parent asks to change the holiday schedule	 Never mailed Christmas cards	 Child says, "I already have this!" after opening gift	 Miscommunication about gift or event	 Child (or adult) meltdown





# CHRISTMAS PODCASTS

If you'd rather listen to something other than "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer," while planning holiday festivities, here are some handpicked podcasts from us to you.

Merry Christmas!

## Stepfamilies and Christmas

"It's the most wonderful time of the year!" Or is it? For stepfamilies, the holidays can get complicated fast. Which often spells stress! Listen in for some perspective and wise counsel on how to navigate Christmas in a stepfamily.

<https://www.familylife.com/podcast/familylife-this-week/stepfamilies-and-christmas/>

## Blending Your Family Traditions

Blending two families is hard, but blending family traditions at the holidays takes the "blender" to a higher speed. Listen to an honest discussion of the relational issues that can show up at the holidays and how to move past the tension.

<https://www.familylife.com/podcast/familylife-today/blending-your-family-traditions/#section-guest-box>

## Stepfamilies and the Holidays

Co-parenting issues can complicate stepfamily relationships, especially at the holidays. Gain tips and ideas on how to promote harmony as you co-parent through the holiday season.

<https://www.familylife.com/podcast/familylife-blended-podcast/21-stepfamilies-and-the-holidays/>