

Christmas 2005: top tips

Whether or not you're celebrating a religious festival, this is a time of year that should bring you and your family fun and enjoyment, when you look forward to spending extra time together. However, if you are bringing up children on your own, you could find that you have extra pressures over the holiday period, which may make it a particularly difficult time for you to cope with. If you are feeling anxious, isolated or just need a little support, we hope this leaflet will help – we have ten tips for making the most of your time and resources and a list of useful organisations you can contact for information and advice.

Top ten tips for lone parents at Christmas time

So, whether this is your first year as a lone parent, or whether you've done it all before, here are our top ten tips for surviving the holiday period:

1. Make sure the children don't miss out

The holiday period is a time for children to have fun. This might be your children's first Christmas without both parents. Consider the time that your child might want to spend with their other parent or the other parent's relatives, such as grandparents. If your children will be spending the majority of their time away from you during the holiday, make sure you set aside some special time to spend with them before they go away or when they return. That way neither you nor your children miss out on any activities you normally enjoy at this time of year.

2. Plan and stick to a budget

Taking your regular expenditure into account, work out how much extra money you can afford to spend over the holiday period. Because of the bank holidays, benefits and wages may be paid to you early so you may need to budget for a longer period than normal. Also remember that you may have higher than normal utility bills to pay in the months following the holiday period. Make a realistic budget and stick to it as much as you can.

3. Avoid using credit

Try to avoid using credit or borrowing money to pay for things, especially if you can afford to buy them with cash at the time. If you do have to use credit, think carefully about whether you will be able to meet the repayments when they are due or afford the interest charged. Don't be persuaded to sign up for store cards if you're out shopping for gifts, as they can charge even higher interest rates than credit cards – currently averaging at around 30 per cent.

4. Plan and agree arrangements for contact

Try and make the planning of any contact arrangements as fair as possible for everyone involved, especially your children. It should be easier and less emotional if you make arrangements with the other parent as early as possible and work out who the children will spend their time with at this time of year. You and the other parent may wish to share the time over the holidays. It is important for your children to spend time with their other parent and you can use this as an opportunity to spend time on yourself, arrange to see your friends and family and rest, relax and recharge your batteries.

5. Don't feel under pressure to spend too much

Don't leave shopping until the last minute. Shopping in a rush could mean you buy up whatever's left on the shelves and spend more money than you meant to in a panic to remember everything. If you can, try to buy things over a number of weeks, bit by bit, in the run up to the holiday period. If you are able to discuss things with your child's other parent, work out who will buy what and share the cost of presents. Other family members may also be willing to help with presents for the children.

6. Don't feel isolated – you don't have to do it alone

If you're feeling pressured by doing everything on your own, especially if this is your first Christmas alone, get in touch with other lone parents – they might be feeling the same. Shopping together could save you money on multi-buy offers or other in-store discounts. You could take it in turns to make a meal or plan to have one together over the holidays. Organisations such as Gingerbread have local groups that you can join. These can be a great source of support and social contact for you and your children, and they often organise activities and social events at this time of year.

7. Involve the children

Remember to involve your children in the planning over the holiday period. If you have older children, you might need to consider that they may want to do things outside the family with their friends. Talk to your children and give them as much advance notice of planned activities as possible, so that they feel included. Children can help out with the cooking or shopping or could, if you celebrate Christmas, have fun making decorations. Communicating with your children and working together can help to avoid tension and disappointment.

8. Think about the future

If this is the first time you are spending the holiday period as a one-parent family, you may find that the usual family traditions, that you have previously enjoyed, seem different or are harder to cope with. Don't feel that you have to make things 'perfect'. If your children are older and can understand, explain that things will be different this year and deal with the change in your situation in a positive way. Children can be more resilient than you think. Why not introduce some new activities you can do together as a family, like going for a walk in the park? This might be something that you can carry on year after year.

9. Find out about cheap activities

Check your local newspaper, library, community centre or supermarket noticeboard for details of any seasonal events. You may be able to find events that are cheap or even free, but will still be a treat for the children. If there aren't enough people in your family

to take advantage of family tickets or other discounts for shows or leisure activities, join up with another oneparent family or other friends.

10. Look after yourself and ask for help

Remember to take time to relax when you can, even if there is just one afternoon when you can put your feet up and spend time on yourself. You could end up feeling overwhelmed if you try to do everything on your own without support. Get together with your children, family and friends and share the workload so that you can all enjoy the holiday period. There are also organisations you can contact for information, advice or just for a listening ear.

Press Contacts:

One Plus

Marion Davis, Development/Policy Senior Manager Tel: 0141 333 1450

Marion.davis@oneplus.org

Or Carol MacInnes, Linda Young Public Relations Tel: 0141 249 6735 /07739 774091

carol@lypr.co.uk

One Parent Families Scotland

Ian Maxwell, Deputy Director

Tel: 0131 557 7892

ianmaxwell@opfs.org.uk

Mob: 07887 500667

Royal Bank of Scotland Group

Colin Pyle, Group Media Relations

Tel: 0131 523 5659

Colin.Pyle@rbs.co.uk

Mob: 07867 750927

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