

Steering Your Sleigh During the Holiday

by Tom Roston



Ho, ho, ho. The holiday season is here and everyone is full of good cheer. There are presents under the tree. The children are happy. And meals are plentiful with warm food and delightful conversation.

Or, is it:

Ughhhh! It's that time of year again, and the stress is mounting. The kids want gifts that you can't get. Your ex is staring daggers into you. And you have no idea where you're going to be on December 25th.

Or, maybe, it's somewhere in between.

With the holidays come high expectations. It's a time when many of us get a clearer picture of where our lives are at: the state of our families, the state of our finances, and the state of our own happiness. Which is to say, not only is there a lot to handle in terms of planning and expenses, it can also be a heavy mental burden if things are not exactly as we want them to be.

I sat down with Dr. Vincent Guilamo-Ramos, an Associate Professor of Social Work at the Columbia University School of Social Work, who is also our Dr. G; he helps NYC DADS out when it comes to matters of the mind and the heart. Growing up of modest means in the Bronx himself, Dr. G recalls the feeling of wonder and excitement of walking around in Manhattan during Christmas time. But he also remembers an underlying tension, of feeling alienated surrounded by riches that he could not have.

In the same way that children grapple with what they have and don't have, we, as adults, need to reconcile expectations with reality during the holiday season. That doesn't mean we can't strive for more, but every man has to spend some time looking in the mirror. Dads who feel sad about not having that traditional, cheerful Holiday spirit should separate that disappointment from where they are really at with their children. And recognize you're not the only one with a family that is "different."



"You can still have a joyful holiday," says Dr. G, who emphasizes the importance of embracing different kinds of gatherings that can create a warm, supportive, familial spirit. "Take the children to other family; your parents or siblings. Or it can be with friends. There are plenty of different kinds of gatherings, whether it's work holiday parties, church celebrations or some other form of community event." (For example, Riverside Church, in Harlem, hosts a celebration on December 24th; the church encourages NYC DADS to come on by, whether it's to volunteer or to be on the receiving end for free food and gifts. Call 212.870.6700 for more information about the "Jesus' Birthday Celebration" event.)

And if you are not with your children on the 24th or 25th of December, how about creating a strong tradition on a different day? For those who don't live in lockstep with the American Dream (in other words, pretty much all of us), it's possible to create one's own rituals and traditions. Try to make it something that doesn't involve stress or family tensions. Why not an annual dinner at Junior's every December 20th? If the kids like Chinese food, how about a trip to Chinatown every December 30th? Or take them to the movies. Make it your own, and make it something that you and your kids can enjoy together.

Sure, it can be difficult being different, but you're not as different as your kids (and you) may fear. There are a lot of families dealing with the same things you are. In fact, if you know one, you could join forces together. And tell your kids to look on the bright side: they get more chances to celebrate the holidays.



Ah, but then there's the issue of gifts. Reconciling with reality is easier said than done, especially when it comes to gift-giving. Presents mean the world to kids. That X-box or those sneakers becomes bigger than life. And, yes, of course, gifts are great and kids should have them, but as hard as it is to explain it to them, you have to remind your kids that Christmas is not about the gifts. You know very well that whatever the hot gift is this year, it could be broken in six months. What kids need during the holidays is quality time spent with their family. They may not know it now, but that's the greatest gift you can give them.

Of course, this sounds good in theory, but, say, if your kids' mother's boyfriend is buying them more expensive gifts than you are; you know that's going to hurt. But you have to remain strong. You have to buy for your kids what you think is reasonable—for them and for you. Draining your wallet just to save face during the holidays could easily build resentment in you, and it could also create stress that will make you less of the good dad you want to be. You've got to be the parent on this one, and hold the line.

Gifting can be hard, but what can be even more difficult to handle is all of the booze that gets passed around during the holidays. It's tempting to let alcohol and other vices ease us through this time, but you have to be careful. We all have a sense of our own limits—we have to do our best to stay within them. Or, as Dr. G suggests, the best thing to do is to plan in advance and "consider ways that we can avoid these negative influences before we actually are faced with being in a "real life" risky situation. In other words; have a plan for staying away from these vices," he says. "Be clear exactly what you will do if you encounter a situation where you feel vulnerable or tempted to use." (It's worth noting here that Dr. G also recommends to not make New Year's resolutions; hard and fast rules, he says, can often lead to disappointments, and set you further back than you want to be.)

Corny as it sounds, love is what's most important during this season. And that applies to loving ourselves, as well as loving our children. If there is ever a time of the year when we can be more forgiving of ourselves, it is now. If there is ever a time when we can appreciate what we do have, it is now. And if there is ever a time when we can embrace our children, it is now. And, for the last time, that does not mean by showering them with material goods. Shower them with attention, good times, and hugs—and if you're not that kind of guy, then plenty of high-five's.