

Wait, Are Divorced Couples Really Vacationing Together Now?

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DEAR DR. JENN,

I recently read about how Gwyneth Paltrow went on her honeymoon with her new husband and brought along her ex-husband. I can barely sit in a room with my ex, much less vacation with him. In the beginning we tried to do holidays and family dinners to make the kids happy but it was a disaster. What is realistic for a family post divorce? —*Consciously Undinnering*

DEAR CONSCIOUS,

It has been estimated that 42 to 46 percent of marriages end in divorce. As a result, a lot of families struggle with exactly how to pick their lives apart, parcelling out the belongings and the time (with kids, with the house, with the family dog), in a way that works for all involved. Some, as you see in the case of Gwyneth Paltrow, choose to barely pull things apart at all. We all remember when she and Coldplay front man Chris Martin “consciously uncoupled,” thus raising the bar on breakups forever.

In this poorly boundaried world of Gwyneth Paltrow and Chris Martin, Hilary Duff and Mike Comrie (another post-divorce vacationing couple) many divorced families feel pressure to spend time together, do family dinners, share holidays or even vacation together. Almost every family I have seen in my private practice makes a vow to “do it differently” than the families who came before them. It is a rare family who can make that work.

Most divorced parents are motivated by the idea that family vacations or dinners will make the kids happy. That is far from guaranteed and, in fact, can backfire, making the split even more stressful and confusing for the kids. Here's why, and what you need to know before trying this out for yourself.

You Can't Skip the Pain

Acting like your family has not changed does not make it so. In order to mourn the loss of the family as they know it, kids have to experience their new family situation as it really is. Kids need the room to grieve what they are experiencing. Trying to save them from looking at an empty dining room chair actually does them a disservice.

Boundaries, Boundaries, Boundaries

Learning the new rules of engagement after a divorce is important for everyone. Understanding what is appropriate to talk about with whom, what everyone's new roles are, and what kind of privacy is expected between homes is more challenging when parents are spending regular time together. Some exes continue to milk each other for the parts of the marriage that they most enjoyed or benefited from, rather than learning those skills on their own. When this is done in front of the children, it can be emotionally confusing. Another thing that can be confusing is to have a parent going in and out of the house they once shared all together. It's important to model respect for personal space to children. I have

seen all too many cases of exes using a visit to the home they once shared as a way to rummage through each others' belongings. Needless to say, this does not result in a peaceful family dinner.

Beware a Hidden Agenda

It is a rare divorce that is 100% totally mutual. There is usually one person who wants the marriage back. Having family time together can be misleading for your ex-spouse, not to mention your children. Kids, especially young ones, typically spend a long time hoping that their parents will get back together, and things will be as they always knew them to be. Family dinners and vacations can result in false hopes for all involved.

Old Patterns Persist

Families function as a system, each person has a job and we tend to stick to these old roles to maintain balance. For example, if a dad is the one working late and long hours, and the mom is the one making family dinners, helping with homework, tending to everyone's emotional needs, this pair will remain in that pattern post-divorce; the kids won't get what they need from their dad when visiting his home, and mom will be supporting everyone on vacations and dinners together. Who wins in that scenario? It is important to develop new relationship skills with your children after a divorce, and time alone with them the best way to fill the gaps in your parenting skill set.

Tension Remains

All too often, even the most well intentioned parents find that the anger they had during their marriage still exists and leaks out during their post-divorce interactions with one another. If there is any hint of hurt, resentment or anger — which there usually is — you're more likely to be easily triggered. Sarcasm, being snarky, making passive-aggressive comments or full blown fights can be salt to children's divorce wound. Separating your lives from one another frees them of that burden.

It Makes Future Changes Harder

Constant family time means that when one of the parents starts dating someone new and it gets serious enough to start to integrate them into the home they share part time with their children, it can be more complicated. Stopping family dinners because there's someone new on the scene and it is uncomfortable tends to make kids resent the new person. A quicker, cleaner break can ease these later transitions.

The Big Question

But let's say a peaceful family dinner (or even a trip together) does come to pass. Inevitably, this raises the question for kids of, "If you get along this well why did you have to get divorced?" It is lovely if you can be friends with your ex, but the flip side is that it can cause your kids a lot of hurt to see you getting along so well and not be together.

The Gwyneth Paltrows and Chris Martins of the divorce world are rare. Sure, there are some unicorns who are able to have decent post-divorce family time. Generally they are people who had a totally mutual divorce, no financial entanglements, no betrayal, and no resentment. Sadly, that is not the norm when couples split. Even that special group needs to examine what messages they are sending their kids about moving on into their new life, creating new boundaries, grieving the loss of the family as they have known it, and letting go. And after all that, a vacation — sans any exes — will surely be in order.