

Single parent offers advice for holidays

Jennifer Burke/Catholic Courier

Robin James vividly remembers Christmas 1996 because it was the first holiday season she experienced as a single parent. She knew she wouldn't want to be away from her children on Thanksgiving and Christmas, so she and her ex-husband decided to each spend half the day with their children.

Being alone for half the day was difficult. James initially thought that being around other family members would help ease the pain she felt, but she soon discovered watching family members interact with their kids just made her miss her own six children even more.

James, who belongs to St. Patrick's Parish in Owego, never really got used to being without her children on a holiday, but found being with another single parent whose children were also away that day provided some solace.

The struggle James' family faces each holiday season is not unique. The number of single parents in the United States tripled between 1970 and 1996, according to the 1997 Population Profile of the United States, which is published by the U.S. De-



Second in a series
Single Parenting

partment of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration and the Bureau of the Census.

The report states that the number of single parents living with their own children grew from 3.8 million in 1970 to 11.7 million in 1996. According to the same report, 28 percent of children were living with only one parent in 1996, compared to 12 percent in 1970.

Not all single parents have been through a divorce. Some may be widows; some may be separated and others may have never married at all. Each year many parents face the prospect of celebrating the holidays without a spouse if that spouse is serving in the military or in prison, for example.

Oftentimes, the parent who is still at home with the children feels pressure to try to fill the void left by the other parent, James said.

"You're trying to be mom and dad and there's no way you can do that," she said, noting that feelings of guilt can sometimes motivate a parent to overcompensate.

During the holidays, family traditions often create lasting memories, but they can also pose a problem for families dealing with the absence of a parent for the first time.

"You have all these traditions you've made as a family and you're trying to do them and you're a person short," James said. "If you can't do the old traditions, come up with some new ones. That can be really fun."

Before the divorce, James and her family always picked out a Christmas tree together. After the divorce, it became impossible to coordinate the schedules of James and her children, who now range in age from 8 to 17, in the limited time they had together. Now, James picks out a tree while her children are away, and when they return they decorate it as a family and then go to her parents' house and make popcorn balls.

While this new tradition seemed strange at first, it's actually easier than having seven people arguing about seven different potential Christmas trees, James said with a chuckle.

Well-meaning friends and relatives may wonder how to help someone who will be spending their first holiday season without a partner this year. It's always helpful to have supportive people to lend a listening ear, but there's not much that people outside the family can do beyond that, James said.

"In reality it's something that the parents and the kids have to deal with and come together in their own way," she said.

A parent never really gets used to the pain of being without their loved ones during the holidays, James added, but it doesn't have to be the end of the world.

"You know going into it, it's not going to be easy. You just make the best of what you have, and be thankful that you've got what you've got," James said. "Take your time, relax and try to enjoy the holiday. It is a little different, but it works out OK. You have to just add a few new twists that you didn't do before."



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