

Divorce can complicate holiday season

Students from divorce describe holiday changes

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This Christmas, millions will celebrate the holiday in what could be described as a picture-perfect way: surrounded by loved ones, eating and laughing, enjoying each other's company.

However, for those who belong to broken families, the holidays scarcely resemble the jovial celebrations seen in movies. Divorce often plays a major role in forever changing the way a family celebrates Christmas. Holidays can be stressful for everyone, but for children of divorced or separated parents, the holidays can be especially challenging.

Junior Kylea Gardner, whose parents separated in August of 2012, recalls the sadness that her parents' divorce caused during previous holidays.

"I can definitely say that the first Christmas my family didn't spend together as a whole made me way more upset about my parents' separation than I had ever been before," Gardner said. "Christmas is easily my favorite holiday, and having to spend it in different households for the first time was horrible. Fortunately, over time, we've learned to make it work."

Senior Newton Koemel tells of how his parents, who recently divorced, have always done their best to put their children's happiness ahead of any disagreements.

"My parents always tried to set their differences aside for the sake of trying to be a 'normal' family during the holidays," Koemel said. "This is the first year in which my siblings and I will spend Christmas with each parent separately."

Gardner says that she has gradually adapted to the separation of her parents.

"I've gotten pretty used to the whole idea of spending the holidays in a million different places, but I can't say that it doesn't still both-



A young Kylea Gardner (left) gives a thumbs up to her parents after opening a present during Christmas of 2004. Newt Koemel and siblings Alayna and Kolt (below) gather for a photo used for a family Christmas card. Both photos were taken prior to their parents divorcing.

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY KYLEA GARDNER AND NEWT KOEMEL



er me some," Gardner said. "Divorces are really hard on people and their families, and I feel like, in all honesty, the holidays will never really feel 'normal' again."

Koemel expresses similar feelings.

"Christmas isn't really a bitter time for me," Koemel said. "I'm still always looking forward to that time of year. It's just that memories from my earliest Christmases always remind me of the way things used to be, and I'm always disappointed that it can't be that way again."

Gardner describes that she occasionally feels envious of friends from unbroken homes.

"I do find myself being jealous of seemingly 'normal' families, because it's really special to be able to spend Christmas all together as a family, and I know that's something I'll never have again," Gardner said.

Koemel disagrees.

"I'm not necessarily jealous of those who have married parents, but I miss the times when everyone

was under one roof during the Christmas season," Koemel said. "When my grandfather was alive, about eight years ago, he did a good job of bringing the family together at Christmastime."

Koemel further describes the importance of his grandfather's presence.

"My grandfather always managed to keep my mom's side of the family together because he was such an affable person," Koemel said. "He managed to get along with everyone, even when other members of the family weren't agreeing with each other. My family used to meet at his house for the holidays with food and presents for every person, and everyone was always happy to see each other. Since we lost him to ALS, we've never had another Christmas like that."

Gardner also describes Christmases of her past.

"Every Christmas before the divorce, our whole family would wake up super early in the morning, open all of our presents together, and spend the entire day as a close-knit family," Gardner said. "Now, I alternate every other year spending Christmas Eve with one parent and spending Christmas Day with the other."

Despite now having to spend the holidays in different places, Gardner says the way her family celebrates the holiday has changed very little.

"The Christmases I spend with each parent usually don't differ much," Gardner said. "We typically do the same things we did when we were all together: wake up early, open gifts, take a nap, and spend the day being lazy together."

Koemel also says that even with the recent change in how he will celebrate the holiday, some traditions will still be upheld.

"My father was raised in Corpus

Christi, and his parents always received homemade tamales from a Hispanic family that worked on their ranch," Koemel said. "We like to continue that tradition, as well as a tradition honoring our German ancestry. On Christmas morning, we eat a German Christmas bread called stollen. It's filled with fruit, covered in powdered sugar, and meant to represent baby Jesus in swaddling clothes."

Koemel says that he's learned valuable lessons from his parents' situation.

"From my parents, I've learned what not to do when it comes to keeping my family together," Koemel said. "Also, I've learned not to underestimate the value of heartfelt family moments."

Gardner agrees that strong family connections should be highly valued.

"I feel like far too many people take having families not affected by divorce for granted," Gardner said. "I know I did. If I could go back in time, I would cherish those moments much more, because now I realize life is wildly unpredictable, and it's not guaranteed that people will always have time to spend with their loved ones."

Koemel explains, because of his personal experience, how he will do everything in his power to keep his future family whole and happy.

"When I have a family of my own, I'm going to do my best to always keep Christmas sacred," Koemel said. "I've always cherished the holidays, and I am going to do my best to present it in a special, loving way to my wife and children."

Gardner has high expectations for her future family as well, in hopes that they will never have to endure what she has.

"I want more than anything in the world for my children to never know what it's like to be forced to spend Christmas in separate places," Gardner said. "I hope that the first person I marry is the only person I'm with for the rest of my life, so that my family will never be troubled with the pain of divorce. I want us to be able to spend every holiday together as a family, no matter what happens."