

insights



Managing Christmas Chaos as a Sole Parent

by Penny Webb



Did anyone else blink and miss 2017? December is hard to navigate at the best of times, but when you're a single parent it can be particularly challenging logistically, physically, emotionally and mentally.

The end-of-year school concerts, presentation ceremonies, work parties, school parties, social catch-ups, Christmas shopping, decorating, more parties ... anyone else exhausted just reading this?

Nevertheless, here we are just weeks away from the busiest time of year, so it's time to get proactive about managing the chaos that comes with Christmas.

1. Get technical

Technology has been my saviour in recent years. If it isn't in my smartphone, it doesn't happen! As soon as you receive an invitation or notification of an event, enter it into the calendar on your phone. This will minimise the risk of double bookings or at least get you on top of logistics early. For each event I set a reminder for a week ahead, a day ahead and an hour ahead.

Cozi (www.cozi.com) is a scheduling app that can link multiple users within a family. If you and your ex-partner are on Cozi, you can both see important dates that have been scheduled, such as school concerts and end-of-year presentations. Cozi is particularly useful for families that have shared care of the kids, helping everyone to stay across important dates with much less risk of something getting missed.

There is also the Parachuute app (www.parachuute.com) to help with the logistics of getting multiple children to multiple locations. Created by two Melbourne mums, Parachuute is a carpooling app that allows you to tap into your trusted network for help with transporting the kids to their various events.

2. Ask for help

There is a reason the saying "It takes a village..." is so popular. It absolutely DOES take a village to raise a child, especially if you are doing it solo. You physically cannot be in two (or more!) places at once, so reach out and ask family, friends and neighbours you trust for help.

When I moved two hours away from our family home in Sydney, I didn't know anyone. But less than a year later, I have a lovely bunch of friends – mostly parents of my sons' friends – whom I feel confident I can turn to when I need extra help. It may feel uncomfortable, but asking for help is one of the simplest things you can do to manage the busyness of Christmas.



3. Lower the high expectations you've set for yourself

This was a big one for me. Once I realised that aiming for perfection was only going to lead to disappointment – let's face it, nobody is perfect! – I relaxed the ridiculously high standards I had set for myself. These standards were borne of parent guilt, divorce guilt, any sort of guilt you can think of. I did the emotional and mental work necessary to loosen up and lower those expectations.

Why spend hours handmaking individual gifts for teachers, coaches and dance instructors when a handwritten and heartfelt note of thanks will make just as much, if not more, of an impact?

4. Parenting down

My wonderful therapist shared this concept with me. It's for those tough days – those times when everyone is a little exhausted, ratty and emotional. You don't have to serve up a fresh, homemade meal with the perfect ratio of the five food groups. No way! If it's been a tough day, parent down. That's what 2-minute noodles or Weet-Bix for dinner is for. Give yourself a night off from your own expectations.

5. The gift of presence

Your financial situation changes when you separate, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. If money is a little tight, the kids won't mind if there are less toys under the tree. Give the gift of your presence. Make a list of fun, low or no-cost experiences you can share together. Bushwalks, trips to the beach, even an afternoon running around under the sprinkler in the backyard. These are what memories are made of and memories last much longer than the latest Pokemon.



I also use this little ditty to keep a lid on gifts: "Something they want, something they need, something to wear and something to read." Add some fun family experiences into the gift-giving mix and you'll have happy kids.

Christmas can be a tough time of year for single parents. Getting on the front foot from an organisational point of view will stand you in good stead for managing the physical, logistical and emotional demands December brings.

Just keep swimming. You got this.



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