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On Parenting

The heartache of every other spring break as a divorced mom

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When mom doesn't go on spring break.

By Erin Mantz

You prepare yourself for a lot of things when you get divorced and have kids. You carefully coordinate joint custody schedules, stock up on clothes so your kids have plenty at each house, buy double shin guards and mouth guards.

There's a lot you can anticipate and plan for. There's a lot that most divorced parents eventually adjust to – even having the kids gone every other weekend or every other Wednesday. But one thing that's tougher to get over is the “every other spring break.”

This year, it's not “my year.” And I miss my boys.

I try to not let married parents' expectations, questions and reactions get me down. In the weeks leading up to spring break, though, I could not avoid conversations. Everywhere I went – from basketball practice to grocery store lines – I got the question “Where are you guys going for spring break?” Innocent enough, everyone smiles when they say it; I don't expect everyone to remember I'm divorced, or how shared custody works on school breaks and holidays. But it's the look in the other parents' eyes when I'm about to answer, anticipating and curious, then surprised and uncomfortable, when I explain “I don't have the kids this year.”

Their expressions turn to shock, embarrassment, and sadness. In our town, it's almost assumed everyone has endless money to go somewhere, and endless time as an intact family. *Choosing to be divorced and miss out on time and trips with your kids?* For many, it's hard to fathom.

I don't know how to make other parents feel better, because I can't even understand it myself. I knew this was coming. I signed up for this. So why does my heart hurt as my boys spend sunny days on the beach with their dad, thousands of miles away for a week? I am happy for them that they can grow up doing these kinds of things. I just miss them.

Spring break veers us off the set schedule. It's not like when they're gone on Wednesday nights, just 15 minutes away. They are having a faraway vacation experience without me, making memories I'll never share, and they're growing up so fast. Spring break makes it all crystal clear, just like the ocean they're probably diving into right now.

Years ago, I (sort of) gave up worrying if they'd wear sun screen without me, what they'd eat when they were at their dad's, if they'd have too much soda and candy on vacation and if they'd have enough socks or run out of underwear, or even if they'd have a good day or a bad day and not see me at the end of it, so I wouldn't know. When I become a divorced mom, I learned to live with not being able to control everything. I got used to it throughout most of the year.

But spring break is one of about three times a year I let myself feel sad and sorry for myself being a divorced mom. I'm a happy person and particularly optimistic by nature. I look on the bright side. I don't say much negative stuff (though I may think it). I tough it out. But this week, I miss my boys, their little voices (well, my high school freshman's voice is not so little anymore) and accounts of their day – even complaints about homework and how they need more Nikes. At least every other Wednesday night, I can picture them walking in and out of their normal activities, in places I've been before. But not when they are on vacation without me.

The reality is they are growing up without me half the time. I signed up for that; it's called divorce. It just hits a little bit harder every other season.

As I learn to live as a single parent, maybe this, too, I will get used to. And I know that soon enough, they'll be back, creating piles of dirty laundry, leaving Oreo cookie wrappers

strewn across the living room and yelling “What’s for dinner?” I’ll feel fed up, overwhelmed, and frustrated with the mess and chaos – but I’ll be happy they’re really, finally, here.

Erin Mantz is a writer, marketing professional and mother of two boys.