

Guide to "Telling the Children About the Divorce"

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Here are some general suggestions for talking with children about separation and divorce. Research over the last five years has revealed that over 75% of divorcing parents talk to their children about this change in the family for *less than ten minutes - total*. This guide is meant to help YOU be one of the parents in the healthiest 25 percent. Children need to talk about this, and they need to hear about it. Even if they say they don't want to do either.

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Tell children approximately 2-3 weeks prior to separation. Have a plan - at least the basics - before you tell them.

1. If possible talk to children together as a couple, with both parents prepared to work as a team, and convey unified caring and concern – try to prepare to do this when you are unlikely to lose temper, or become angry with each other.
2. Talk to children in a quiet space when there is nothing that needs to be done afterwards. Weekends are best -- if possible at the start of a weekend so you will be around for them to talk to or be close to during the immediate days after the talk.
3. Tell their teachers the day before you tell the kids, to prepare the teachers for potential upset or acting up. Ask teachers to be sensitive, and discreet with the information - you are asking them to be understanding, but NOT to ask the children anything about it, or mention it unless the child mentions it.
4. When parents talk to the children, there are a few really important messages to repeat over and over again - during the conversation, and in the months following:

- a) this is something mom and dad have decided after a long time of trying to make things work better
 - b) this is an adult decision and has NOTHING to do with anything the children did or said; help the children understand they also cannot control this decision to separate/divorce by behaving "extra nicely".
 - c) no one is blaming anyone else -- the children are free to continue loving each parent fully without fear of betraying other parent or feeling disloyal (this may be the toughest challenge for many parents, but it is CRUCIAL if you want to protect the children from pain and maladjustment)
 - d) a lot of different feelings are normal -- we all will feel sad, angry, worried, and maybe curious about the future -- all feelings are normal - parents welcome listening to all feelings and will try to help the children no matter how they feel.
 - e) we are still a family - we are just changing. We will still be your mom and dad, no one is going away (as long as this is true), and mom and dad will love them as much as ever; if one parent IS moving some distance away, reassure the children that they will see that parent regularly, and explain how that might be accomplished.
5. If possible, tell them the plan -- it does not need to be extremely detailed, but you should be able to tell them the basics -- who will stay in the house? who will be moving out - and approximately where? If a parent is still looking at apartments/houses, it is ok to invite the children to come with you to look at the new places - if they don't want to come, leave it alone. If a parent already has found a place, it is good to tell children where it is, and bring them over to see it within a few days. Tell them the basic plan -- that they will see both parents every week, that they will see both parents every weekend - basic reassurance that they will be with Dad sometimes and with Mom sometimes, and (ideally) you will be all together sometimes for things like soccer games and celebrations (some celebrations - perhaps....but don't promise anything you cannot deliver.)
6. For a second conversation - a few days after the first, if you know some more of the details of the plan, like "Dad will be driving you to school every day just like he does now" tell them that. Anything that is staying the same, mention and reassure them that these things will remain the SAME. The things that will be different - "Mom will be driving you to school now -- we know that is DIFFERENT, but we are going to try to make that work, and Mom can do some of the same fun things that Dad did...we'll see how it goes and you can tell us what is working, and what is not working."

7. Be ready for any reactions - children sometimes have tantrums, cry, or say, "When is dinner?" and pretend they didn't hear you. Some kids ask a lot of questions, and some ask nothing. The children who say nothing need to be coaxed over the coming weeks and months to talk to you, to draw pictures about it, to read books with you about it....etc. The children who ask a lot of questions need to be answered, and reassured over and over again.
8. Try not to hound the children about their feelings, but ask them a question or two every few days. For example: How are you doing with the changes in our family? How was school today...did you find yourself thinking about dad/mom moving a lot during your day in class? Was that hard? What did you do when you felt sad? Did you talk to anyone? What might help when you feel sad about it -- what ideas do you have for what you can do? (talk to a friend, a teacher, the school counselor, mom, dad, sibling, aunt, cousin....draw pictures about your feelings.....get a hug from mom/dad.....punch a pillow and yell.....)
9. In a future conversation, talk to the children about what they already know, or think they know, about divorce/ Do they have friends whose parents are divorced? How does it go? What are they scared of? What do those friends LIKE about it (sometimes kids will talk about how they have two Christmases and two birthday parties and it's sort of a bonus. Even if this isn't really what they feel, kids are interested in this aspect of divorce and it helps them think through the idea that life will go on and many things will be OK.) Help reassure them about worries that are NOT realistic (let kids know they can take some toys to the new house; that the pet will go back and forth with them perhaps, or their nanny will go back and forth, or whatever you can tell them about what will make them feel better.)
10. If parents get choked up, or cry, it is OK. Acknowledge that this is a sad event for the family, but you will all try to help each other with this, and you will all still love each other. If one parent starts to get mad, or say things that are upsetting or scary for the children, the other parent should RESCUE the situation, NOT MAKE IT WORSE -- just say, Mom/Dad is really upset, and this is hard for us all. Let's take a little break, and we'll talk again later. I understand how hard this is for all of us. -- Be forgiving, even if your spouse is not handling it well - this is for the sake of the children who may feel – initially - like the world is falling apart. You are going to try to make the world still feel safe, even if the reality as they know it is changing dramatically.

11. Let your children know you will ALL get through this – and you will. Let them know that they will be OK, and you will be OK, and you will all help each other adjust and adapt to the changes coming. If you can offer both empathy and acceptance for what your children feel, AND reassurance that even the toughest feelings will get easier over time your children will be able to recover and remain open with you about their feelings.

12. Do your best to treat your co-parent well over the next several weeks – and beyond! Your children will be watching and worrying that if you are getting a divorce, it might mean you (their parents) are going to turn into aliens, or you will behave in embarrassing ways, or you will no longer be “normal” parents and make them eat their broccoli. During the weeks and months following this difficult conversation try hard to treat your co-parent with respect and compassion, and try to keep to as many regular family routines and rituals as you can manage – even if you and your co-parent are doing many of them separately. The children will come to see that though some things are really different, some things will remain the same – and that will help them gradually recover and adjust.