

Telling the Kids about Separation and Divorce

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Divorce is tough on everyone--Mom, Dad, as well as the kids. But, there are some steps that parents can take to make the situation less confusing for their children as well as for the family as a whole. Although lives are forever changed by divorce, it doesn't have to be chaotic or devastating if you try to think clearly, attempt to put the children's needs at the forefront, and continue to clarify what is happening in your life as well as the children's'.

Breaking the News

After you've made the decision to separate or divorce and you want to tell the children, there are some things to take into consideration. It's best not to tell them too far in advance (two months may seem forever to a four- year-old), so that they either agonize endlessly until it actually happens or begin to believe that you've changed your mind, when you haven't. On the other hand, only giving a few days or weeks notice is often not enough time for the kids to adjust to the idea, and certainly not enough time to talk with both parents about their concerns and fears. Although no one set of rules or guidelines meets the needs or particular circumstance of every family, common sense and a knowledge of child development suggest the following:

General recommendations for telling children about the impending separation or divorce:

1. If possible, both spouses should be together when telling the children of the impending separation or divorce. Let your children see that even though the two of you have differences, that you will be working together to get everyone through this trying time. Don't be afraid to show emotions--even if you're crying the kids will understand how difficult this is on both of you. However, try to stay on point and to control your behavior so that the kids are not frightened. Giving the kids hugs and kisses, holding little ones on your lap or holding their hands is often tremendously comforting. If the two of you cannot or will not be announcing the situation together to the children at least be sure that you are on the same page of the book. Decide ahead of time the main points that you will be making so that the kids are not confused by discrepancies in the explanation.
2. No matter what the age of the children, do not blame the other parent if possible. Sure, it may be difficult to be civil if you feel that you've been wronged, but it won't help the kids to hear, especially initially, negative comments about the other person. Just digesting the news is tough enough, and having to listen to parents jabbing at each other in the same conversation is cruel.
3. Depending upon the age of the child, give only the necessary information about the reasons for the separation or divorce. Keep it simple, especially for the little ones, and remember to stay on track. You don't need to present a laundry list of each other's crimes—just the facts that you haven't been getting along for some time, that you've tried to work things out (perhaps by attending counseling), and that you're still unhappy in the situation and need to change it. If the kids seem confused or ask

for further information provide an example or two, such as “Dad and I have been bickering a lot this past year or so...you may have noticed. We’ve tried to work out our problems by talking with our counselor, but it’s just not getting better. We believe that it’s better for everyone if we live separately.” Most likely the kids have noticed and may not be totally surprised by your decision...they often see, hear and feel more than you bargained for.

4. If a child brings up a parental behavior that they feel is the problem, and if it is, agree that it is part of the problem, but that there are other contributing factors. In this way you do not lie to the child, but you also don’t begin the accusation process, which may end up with the kids knowing too much about the parental relationship.
5. Be sure to let the kids know that the marriage was based in love, and that they were conceived in love. It’s important for kids to be told by their two most important role models that marriage should be a long-term, stable situation that focuses around the family and the children. Let them know that even though you’ve decided to split up, that you’re both saddened by not being able to continue with the family unit as a whole. Reinforce that you’ve tried hard to work it out and your belief and hope for your children will be an intact family unit for their own adult relationship.
6. It’s not unusual for children to either feel that they have contributed to the problems, or to feel that there is something that they can now do to solve them. It’s extremely important that you address this issue even if the children do not bring it up. Most kids either flirt with this idea or believe it to be true. Tell them in no uncertain terms that this is an adult problem, brought on solely by the adults, and one that can be dealt with by the adults. Confirm that there’s nothing that they can do to get the two of you back together in the same house, but that they can help both of you out during this time by letting you know their feelings and discussing any concerns that they have. Also note that it will be helpful if they continue with their daily activities such as studying and completing homework as well as chores. Let them know that it will make everyone feel better if they keep busy and play with their friends as usual.
7. Along with the confirmation that the separation or divorce is not the fault of the kids, reaffirm that both of you still love them, as always. Mom and Dad may not be in love with each other any more, but explain how that is a different type of love, how loving a child is a “forever thing” but that other types of love may not be so blessed. Don’t expect immediate understanding of that concept—it will take the children some time to realize that although many things will change due to the divorce, your love for them remains unaltered.
8. Finally, to the best of your ability, provide the kids with some information about the immediate future. Keep this short and direct, and as always worded to their age and developmental level. If you know that Dad will be moving out soon, provide an approximate time (“in a few weeks”, “before school starts”, or for older ones “by the end of the month”). Tell them what to expect, such as “Dad will be moving to an apartment just a few miles away. He’ll be picking you up on school days to drive you to school, and I’ll get you from aftercare. You’ll spend time with Dad one or two evenings a week, and will spend the night with him every other weekend. As much as possible your father and I would like you to continue with your after school activities and time with your friends. We’re sure that they’ll be changes occurring—some that you’ll like and some that you won’t. We’ll work on the things that you

want to change the best that we can. It's important, though, that you tell both of us when something is bothering you so that we can, as much as possible, work together to help you out."

Age-specific Recommendations:

Most kids relate to the news of the impending separation or divorce in terms of how it will affect them. Do not confuse this with insensitivity on their part, or selfishness. Children, especially the younger ones, are very dependent upon their parents for love, guidance, providing material necessities and structure to their days. If one of you moves out, how will this affect their daily lives? They don't have the ability to provide for themselves and need reassurance that you will take care of them, just as well as when both parents were living together. Here's some tips as to the particular concerns by age:

1. **Preschool**—Due to the cognitive limitations of children five years old and younger it's best to keep the discussion as simple as possible. Describe how you and your spouse have not been getting along and that Mom/Dad will be moving out and living in her/his own house. Tell the preschooler how much both of you love her and how she will be spending time with both parents, only separately. Describe some of the activities that are special to each of your relationships with her and how you will continue to cuddle, tickle, play games or read to her at bedtime. Your goal is to inform her of the impending change, but not to dwell on it. Try to comfort her with mention of how many things will stay the same—that's what she'll need most, not a discussion of how things will be different. Use your judgement as to whether to inform the child's preschool teachers—usually it's a good idea so that they can be extra supportive during this time.
2. **Early Grade School**—Children in kindergarten, first, and second grades are capable of understanding some of the subtleties of relationships with their friends ("Joey's mean, I don't want to play with him anymore!"), but have difficulty understanding how the two most important adults in their lives can't work things out. After all, they probably have been told many times that "this is an adult issue, I'll handle it—you don't need to worry." Well, this time the adults didn't handle it in a way acceptable to the youngster—he's losing the comfort of having both Mom and Dad living with him in the home. And, he's probably mad or frightened. Expect more questions from the early grade schooler than from the preschooler—as fears increase so should questions. In fact, it's good to encourage the child to communicate and question as much as possible—holding anger or sadness inside doesn't lead to resolution and can result in relationship problems during the adult years. As with the little ones, try to focus on what will not change—Little League will continue and the math tutor will be there on Wednesdays. Also, be sure to use the correct language to describe what is happening—"We are going to become separated" or "Mom and I are getting a divorce." Don't be afraid to use the words "separation" or "divorce"—that's reality and leaves no doubt as to what is occurring. Discuss with the child whether he would like his teacher or school guidance counselor to be told of the family situation—often it's comforting to know that it's okay to speak to these adults at school if he's having an emotional day.

3. Late Grade School— Third, fourth and fifth graders are able to understand and to predict behavior much more so than can younger kids. Due to cognitive developments over the past few years they can put two and two together and often are aware of their parents' problems, even before they are told. They understand the concepts of separation and divorce; in fact some of their friends may come from divorced families. If so, point out how these kids seem to have coped well and how life has gone on for them. Expect a great deal of sadness with this age group. They are old enough to understand the ramifications of divorce—the loss of their family unit as they have always known it, the changing financial situation, the uncertainty as to the future relationship with the non-custodial parent, and the potential embarrassment they may fear when their friends find out. If you expect these issues to surface you'll be better able to cope with their questions as well as statements and opinions. You may be informed, in no uncertain terms, that this divorce is the worst thing that they could imagine. Be prepared to listen, and then listen some more. Even if you disagree with the ideas, try to validate the feelings. Now, more than ever, your children need to be able to be open and honest with their feelings, especially the negative ones, and to see that you respect their point of view. Also expect some worries about living in two houses, sharing holidays, and whether they'll be able to continue at the current school if the custodial parent has to move.
4. Middle School—Twins and early teens often react to the announcement of a separation or divorce with a sullen kind of sadness. When asked how your thirteen-year-old feels you may hear "I don't know", whereas your ten-year-old may tell you exactly what she's thinking. Although the individual nature of each child will dictate their reaction, tweens are already beginning to struggle with peer group difficulties, fitting-in and security issues. A parent leaving the home has a destabilizing effect, especially in the first few years, and tweens can react strongly to fears of losing the stability on the home front at the same time that they may be experiencing insecurity with friends at school. It's important, therefore, that when telling your tween about the impending separation or divorce that you let her know how difficult this may be for her, and to validate her concerns. She'll need extra support and reassurance of the love from both of you, so confirm that time spent with both Mom and Dad will be plentiful, consistent, and something that she can count on. To help calm her social fears discuss how she might broach the subject with her friends and their families, and ask whether she would like you to discuss the family situation with the guidance counselor at school. She may bring up concerns about having to change schools, not having enough money to purchase the types of clothing that she likes, or having to miss out on summer camp. Be honest, but let her know that these issues will be dealt with as time passes. The financial details will be worked out and worked on over the next few months between the adults. Encourage her to focus on her feelings and to share them with you as you anticipate the changes that will occur.
5. High School—Teens are quite able to understand the ins and outs of relationships, and may have already anticipated the break up. It's difficult to not notice Mom and Dad's bickering or cold war, and no amount of hiding in the bedroom can keep the teen away from parental problems. Depending upon your own child's individual personality, peer situation and relationship with each of you, the reaction to the announcement may range from "I knew that this would happen, what did you expect,

Dad, when you treated Mom like that!” to silence (not wanting to provoke either parent) to “You’re ruining my life—how am I going to tell my friends?” The kid is not necessarily being arrogant, selfish or insensitive. This is the age of increasing independence, opinions and exquisite sensitivity to what peers think and feel. Adolescence is also a time for beginning to separate from parents, spending less time with them and more with friends. If you have a close, confiding relationship with your teen she may express her concerns and fears for both herself as well as for you. If your relationship has been tense or she’s just a bit on the secretive side, you may not know how she’s really feeling. But you can bet that she’s sharing her ideas and concerns with her best buddy. Hopefully that kid has a good head on her shoulders and will serve not only as a confidant but also as a support system for your child. Expect, in the initial conversation, questions about visitation (not necessarily “When will I get to see you?” but “I don’t have time on the weekends to stay over your house—when will I see my friends?”). Assure the teen that whatever schedule is worked out will be a family decision, one that is not only reasonable but that also takes her desires into consideration. Comfort concerns about financial changes, school moves, driving privileges and other teen activities with “We’ll work things out as best we can...let the dust settle and we’ll see where we’re at”. As time goes by you’ll be able to tackle problems one by one—you don’t need to have a game plan for everything when you initially discuss the impending separation or divorce with your teen.

Following these guidelines is not a guarantee that the children will be accepting or comfortable with your announcement. But, it does help to set the stage for them to see that although their parents may be splitting up, that you will be co-parenting and working together in their best interest.