

Explaining Separation/Divorce to Children

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General Tips

- Prepare yourself before addressing the issue with the child
- If possible, tell children together when the decision has been made. If this isn't viable, pick an appropriate time and place to tell your children. If there is a wide range in children's ages, it may be helpful later to talk to each one separately after the initial announcement to give more or less information according to age
- Although you may feel angry, it is damaging to your children to express your anger toward your former partner. Try your very best to shield your child from this anger. Also, do not make any negative comments about your former partner to your child
- Tell your child without making any blame statements about your former partner. Telling your child about the other parent's faults jeopardizes the child's relationship with that parent, and this can interfere with your child's healthy development. It is damaging to your child to make statements such as, "This was your mother's idea—I had nothing to do with it" or "I know you're angry at dad for being so selfish, I am too, since your father left us for her." Remember that except in situations of abuse or violence, children benefit from maintaining a positive relationship with each parent. Therefore, fostering a good relationship with the other parent is critical to your child's healthy development.
- Listen to and validate the child's feelings. Invite dialogue about any questions or worries the child might have: "It's normal to feel upset and mixed up. What questions or worries do you have about the separation/divorce?"
- Don't try to rescue the child from the hurt; not talking openly about difficult issues and painful feelings shuts the child down.
- Reassure the child s/he will be cared for (e.g.) "Even though dad and I won't be living in the same home anymore, we will both continue to take care of you."
- Reassure the child that he/she is not to blame (e.g.) "Nothing you said or did made this happen" or "You did not make mom/dad go away." "This happened because of adult problems between us that have nothing to do with anything you said or did."

- Make reassuring comments often. Children need repetition. It's Ok to say the same reassuring comment over and over again (e.g.) "We both love you very much. The kind of love we have for you is the kind of love that never ends."
- Praise your child often. Parents in the midst of separation/divorce are often caught up in their own feelings that they forget to focus on their child's positive behavior
- Don't criticize your ex-partner in front of your child. Remember that your ex-spouse is your child's parent. When you say negative remarks about your ex-spouse to your child, you damage your child
- Realize the importance of supporting your child's relationship with the other parent. Even though it may be very hard for you to do, say often to the child, "Your (other parent) loves you very much."
- Don't make child take sides. Say "You don't have to take sides, you can love mom and dad both the same"
- Set up regular visits with the non-residential parent and explain the schedule to the children. It can be helpful to give your child a calendar and write "M" on days child will be with mom, and "D" on days child will be with dad.
- Understand that children will react to the news in different ways. Depending on their age, they will do any or all of the following: act out, hit, regress (e.g. wet the bed, baby talk, clingy), withdraw, change in eating or sleeping habits, etc. Handle these behaviors by setting clear and consistent limits, and providing acceptable alternatives to their behavior. For example, "I know you feel angry that we have separated, but it is not OK to let out your anger by hitting. You can let out your anger by talking to me about your feelings." Do not punish babyish behavior— Give extra comfort and reassurance.
- Explain to children what will happen next. Children benefit from having notice and preparation for the changes that will occur in their family.
- Telling the children is not a one-time occurrence, but rather, the start of ongoing communication about their relationship with you and the other parent
- Take responsibility for your own behavior. You cannot change your ex-partner's behavior, you can change and control yourself.

- While how and what you say is very important, children are only truly reassured when the words are backed up with parent behaviors that demonstrate the child is a priority.
- Take care of yourself. The better you take care of yourself, the better you can care for your child.

What to Say

Start with a loving message, then give the difficult news, then make reassuring comments, and end with another loving statement

“Mom and dad have something important to talk with you about.”

“Mom and dad love you very much.”

“Mom and Dad are not happy together and cannot live together anymore, so we’ve decided to live in separate homes.”

“We have some adult problems we cannot fix. None of this is your fault. You did not cause our problems and you cannot fix or change them.”

“No matter what, we love you very much. The kind of love we have for you is the kind that never ends. We will always be your parents and we will continue to take care of you.”

Explain living and visiting arrangements: Parent who is leaving: “I am going to move to a new home today. You are going to live here with (i.e. Mommy) and keep going to the same school and see your friends. I will come see you on ____ (or) You will come to my new home on _____. You will have a place to sleep at my house too because I will always be your Mommy/Daddy.”

Invite questions: “Do you have any questions? You can ask or say anything and I won’t be mad at you.”

(If child asks a question you don’t have the answer to) “That’s a good question. Unfortunately I can’t answer that. I know it’s hard to feel confused and uncertain.”

Reassuring Comments:

Alleviate the child's guilt by repeatedly saying, "Nothing you did or said made this happen. You did nothing wrong or bad"

Relieve child's pressure to get you to reconcile by saying: "You did nothing to make this happen and you cannot do anything to make us get back together."

Reassure child that your sadness is not the child's fault: "I am sure this is very upsetting for you, Mom and dad are also upset. You may see us looking upset or even crying—even though we are sad, we are OK and we are here to take care of you. I am not upset because of anything you said or did."

Reassure child that some things will stay the same: "Some things may change, like when and how much time you spend with each of us, but lots of things will stay the same, like you will still go to the same school, and see your friends..."

Reassure child that you will not leave too: "Since dad left, you may be worried that I will leave too. But I am not leaving. I am here to take care of you."

Validate and normalize child's feelings: "I know you feel _____. Whatever you are feeling is normal and OK."

How to Handle More Difficult Situations

Many parents believe it is best to shield children from the truth, that somehow this will protect them. More often than not, the opposite is true. Misleading children, hiding the truth, or lying to them about the circumstances of the separation/divorce can do more harm than good. Here are some reasons why it is important to be open and honest with children about the details of the separation/divorce:

-If adults avoid open discussion with children, this sends the message that it is not okay to talk and children will shut down.

- It is natural to spare children from the truth by making up another explanation. However, children often find out the truth by accident by overhearing a conversation. It is better for children to be given accurate information by their parent(s).

-If children are lied to and later they somehow learn the truth their trust in you can be difficult to regain. They might think, "If you lied to me about this, what else are you lying to me about?"

-When children are given honest and age-appropriate explanations in a planned way by caring adults, it provides an opportunity to process their feelings, answer their questions, and reassure them.

When one parent leaves abruptly: When one parent leaves with no notice or little notice, the remaining parent must deliver difficult news to the children. Children need to be told the parent left because of adult problems they need to work out, and that it has nothing to do with them or their lovability. If the parent left due to alcohol or drug abuse for which the parent is getting help, it is important to explain to the children that the parent is safe and is getting the help they need for their problem. It is not helpful to make up a false reason for the parent's departure, such as "Dad is away for business." Lying to children can lead to problems of trust.

When a parent has done something wrong: If a parent has been violent or done something illegal, it is important for them to take responsibility for this hurtful or inappropriate behavior, and to apologize for the negative impact this has had on the family. If the parent has been involved in physical fights or verbal abuse, they need to acknowledge how frightening and confusing this must have been for the children, and they need to commit to getting help so this does not reoccur. It is helpful to provide the children with direct and honest information, without giving complicated details (e.g.) "Your dad is in jail because he hurt me. I am sure it was scary and confusing for you to see dad hurting me. It is important for dad to get help to make sure this never happens again. Your dad did something wrong but he still loves you very much."

References

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About The Author

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