

How to Talk With Your Children About Divorce

by
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When parents divorce, a child's life is shaken. Though you may be engulfed in grief, this is a time your children will especially need your attention and support. While helping your children through your divorce can be an overwhelming task, your children are counting on you, and you owe it to them to give it your best shot. These suggestions assume that your family is not dealing with domestic violence, child abuse or addiction. While some recommendations may apply, those issues are too complex to address here.

Your children are counting on you.

You must be able to focus on their needs.

Before you tell your children of an impending divorce, it is important to have enough self-awareness and control to be able to focus on their needs. You must be able to respect and support your child's bond with the other parent. If you are not there yet, grieve with a counselor or a gentle friend until you have more emotional clarity. This discussion cannot be a time for self-pity, blame or an attempt to make the children take sides.

Tell your children before announcing to friends or family.

Choose the best time to tell your children. It should be when you know there is no chance for reconciliation. Tell your children before making an announcement to friends or family. If the animosity is not too great between you and your spouse, tell them together. Remember that your children are intuitive, and they may already know.

Avoid having the conversation on a special day.

Avoid having this conversation on a special day, like a birthday or other holiday, which may impact future celebrations. Don't choose just before bedtime. Find a private place with

"Daddy & Mommy have decided to not live together any more."

enough room for a child to go off by herself if she needs alone time. Avoid a public space like a restaurant.

Keep it simple. Children of any age do not need long explanations or fancy language. If both parents want the divorce, these statements might help:

"Daddy and Mommy have decided to not live together any more. We are getting divorced which means we will stop being married."

Your children will blame themselves for your divorce.
They need reassurance.

“We loved each other when we were married, but have grown apart.”

“We care about each other, but can’t live together any more.”

“We are not perfect.
We both made
mistakes. We are
sorry.”

“This is about us. You have done nothing wrong.
We will be your parents forever.”

“We will fight less, and be better parents if we live in different houses.”

If one parent does not want the divorce, try something like, “your (other parent) has decided that s/he is not happy being married and wants to divorce. I don’t want this, but a marriage needs two people to work.”

“We are divorcing each other, we are not divorcing you.”

It is common
for children
to blame

themselves for the divorce and to fear losing a parent. They will need reassurance.

“This is about us. You have done nothing wrong.”

“We are
divorcing each
other. We are
not divorcing you.”

Allow your children to love and be proud of both parents.

“We both love you and always will. We will
be your parents forever.”

To tear down the other parent,
tears down your own child.

“You will spend time with each of us.”

“You don’t have to choose between us.”

Allow your children to seek support from others.

“This doesn’t have to be a secret. You may tell your friends.”

“You might be sad or angry, do you want to talk about that? Is there someone else you would like to talk to?”

“We will be ready to listen to any questions you might have.”

Beyond this discussion, it is important that you allow your children to love and be proud of both parents. Never speak poorly of the other parent in front of the children—even if s/he leaves a lot to be desired. Children feel tremendous

loyalty and know they resemble both mom and dad. To tear down the other parent, tears down your own child. Beyond controlling the trash talk, and not allowing others to engage in it, is wise to conduct your lives in a way that supports a positive view

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At a time of emotional devastation, it is common for parents to try and gain support from their children. While it is good to be honest about your feelings, your children are already dealing with their own strong emotions. It is not fair, and not their job to be your counselor.

Your children will probably respond to your divorce with anger, sadness and a host of other emotions. If you cannot adequately support your children through this transition, if you continue the conflict, you may turn your divorce into the defining event of their childhood. If you can take care of yourself, co-parent as a team, and help your children through the changes, they are far more likely to survive emotionally intact.

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Quotes and ideas for this article taken from How to Talk to Your Children About Divorce, by Jill Jones-Soderman and Allison Quattrocchi, available on this website at: <http://bit.ly/aKQp5Q>.

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