

Breaking The News To Your Kids

How, what, and when to tell the children about your divorce.

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HURT, pain, loss, and anger are feelings you may have about your divorce. And while this may be one of the most stressful periods in your life, it's at least doubly so for your children.

Experts agree that far too often, it's children who suffer most in separation or divorce, so it's important to handle telling them in a mature, adult manner. "Before you tell your kids about your decision to end your marriage, discuss with your spouse what you are going to say and how you will say it," says Stephanie Marston, a licensed marriage, family, and child counselor, in her book *The Divorced Parent*. Julie Criss-Hagerty, Ph.D., a licensed clinical psychologist in Newhall, CA, concurs and adds, "The optimum time is when you have made the final decision to separate and you have a time line as to what is going to happen. Have a game plan in mind with details about visitations, phone calls, and where Mom and Dad are going to be living." The more information children have about the day-to-day facts, the better they are able to deal with this period.

Here are some strategies for talking to your kids and helping them deal with the aftermath of the news.

Tell Them Together, as Early as Possible

If possible, this job should not be done solo. "There are several advantages to telling your children the news together. You let them know that your decision is mutual, mature, and rational, one that you both have considered carefully and to which you are committed," says Marston.

While it's important not to put off breaking the news for too long, you should also avoid jumping into it without thinking about it first. You and your ex-spouse need to take the time to develop a clear plan or strategy for telling the kids before you talk to them. You can make this difficult conversation a little easier by deciding who will say what and by agreeing to support each other in front of the children.

Parents are often surprised that their children know about an impending separation or divorce long before they are officially told. That's because separation and divorce are usually preceded by tension or arguing in the home. However, the kids still need to be officially told, no matter what they might have figured out for themselves.

"It's best if both parents can give the children the news as a couple," confirms Robert M. Galatzer-Levy, M.D., a Chicago-based child and adolescent psychiatrist and the author of *The*

Scientific Basis of Child Custody Decisions. "If they can cooperate enough to do this, it will send a positive message about the future." This approach will give both of you an opportunity to reassure your children of your continued love for them. However, if you think there's going to be a lot of conflict or a confrontation if you tell the children together, then it's better to have one of you break the news to the children alone. Re-enacting major battles in front of your children will probably do more damage than the news of the separation or divorce itself.

See Things Through Your Children's Eyes

It's a good idea to work out some of the details of your divorce before you sit down with the kids. Knowing things such as where they will live, which parent they will live with, and visitation schedules will help your kids get over the initial shock of the news. Although your children will have an immediate emotional response to the news of your separation or divorce, don't be surprised if most of their questions are practical and appear somewhat self-centered.

Children's concerns often depend on their age. "Most children have questions about their security: where they are going to live, or if they're going to stay

at the same school,” says Carol-Ann Flicker, Ph.D., a clinical child psychologist in Beverly Hills. “If they don’t ask the questions, they may act them out. Younger children in particular ‘play divorce’ and take various roles. In some children, there will be sadness and depression. Other kids will be hyper or aggressive, and in some cases, you will see regressive behavior.”

“It’s important to see the problem through your child’s eyes,” says Dr. Galatzer-Levy. “A three-year-old might be most concerned about where the dog’s going to be living, while a fifteen-year-old wants to know if he or she’ll be going to a different high school.” Both you and your ex-spouse may want to consult parenting books or a therapist or mediator before talking to your children.

Be Honest

When it comes to telling the children about the reasons for your separation or divorce, honesty is of the utmost importance. “Try to be as truthful as you can given the age of the kids. Children don’t just listen to the words. They listen to the tone; they notice the look. They see the evidence,” Flicker says. Criss-Hagerty agrees: “Deceptions may be easier for the parent in the beginning, but they will backfire later, and the child will get angry when he or she finds out that the truth has been withheld.”

Be Age-appropriate

Being honest doesn’t mean you should fill them in on every sordid, adult detail; make sure you talk to them in an age-appropriate manner. “A younger child needs simple information, and it should cover what’s happening and what’s going to happen to them. Don’t give them too much information all at once,” advises Flicker. “Teenagers may be more willing to ask why — and they may question the fidelity of one parent. The bottom line in divorce is: don’t lie and don’t bad-mouth the other parent.”

Stick to the Facts

Divorcing parents of adult children should also refrain from saying too much. It’s tempting to use your adult

kids as sounding boards or therapists, but the long-term problems you’ll cause far outweigh any short-lived satisfaction you might feel after unburdening yourself to your child.

Keep It Real

You may also feel compelled to paint a picture of a “better life” after the divorce to smooth things over. Don’t promise things that won’t or can’t

happen. If the children ask you something that you’re unsure of — whether or not everyone has to move out of the family home, for example — let them know you’re not sure and that you’ll keep them up-to-date.

Be Prepared for All Types of Reactions

A child’s age, gender, and level of understanding will affect how they react to the news of your impending separation or divorce. A preschooler may not understand the implications of divorce, but they will certainly notice an absent parent and may fear complete abandonment. An adolescent might assign blame to the parent he or she believes is at fault. Most children feel guilty, but while a teenager may wonder and ask if he or she is the cause of the separation, a younger child will often assume he or she is responsible.

Above all, let your children express their feelings about the separation or divorce, whether it’s denial, sadness, or anger. Since you’re probably going through a pretty tough time yourself right now, you may be tempted to conclude that your kids are fine when they’re actually quite upset.

Listen

Most children respond to the news of a separation or divorce with a lot of questions, such as: “Why is this happening to us/me?” or “Why can’t we all live

together?” While it’s important to listen to their concerns and answer their questions honestly, it’s just as important to listen for their “hidden” questions and concerns. A child often won’t ask the questions that are really on his or her mind: “Is it my fault?” “Will you leave me next?” “Will you always love me?” Children of any age will need repeated assurances that you love them and won’t leave them. “Children of divorce often feel abandoned, particularly when one

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parent leaves. This is why the phone calls and the knowledge of when they will be visiting the absent parent are crucial. Reassure them that you understand their feelings,” says Criss-Hagerty.

Keep the Kids Out of the Middle

You can’t stress enough that this is an adult problem, that the adults are going to work it out, and that you’re going to continue to love your children, no matter what happens.

Don’t ever use your kids as bargaining tools. Every parent in the middle of a divorce has probably thought at least once of using his or her child to get back at a former spouse. Thoughts of withholding support, refusing visitation, or just plain dumping on your kids about your ex may give you moments of pleasure, but ultimately, these actions will only hurt your children.

Nor should you force your children to take sides. Do whatever you can to avoid asking them to give up their loyalty and love for their other parent, either directly or indirectly. This includes subtly trying to find out information about your ex’s activities or telling the kids you’d like to buy them new shoes “but Dad’s not giving us enough money,” for example. Trying to co-opt a child’s loyalty is very damaging: your children will start to feel responsible for your problems and try to solve them. Remember that your kids aren’t divorcing your ex: you are. ■