



Telling Your Children About the Divorce

By SOL R. RAPPAPORT

Telling your children about your divorce is one of the most emotionally challenging and difficult things you will ever do. Most people who want a divorce spend months, if not years, thinking about it and how and when to tell their spouse. They don't spend nearly as much time thinking about how and when to tell their children.

Yet, the manner in which parents tell their children about the divorce will set the stage for how the children perceive and interpret everything that will happen over the coming months and years relative to the divorce. This day will forever alter your children's lives. So think carefully about how and what you will tell them and plan it out. You are setting the stage for how your children cope with your divorce.

When do I tell my kids?

Despite your immediate impulse, do not rush out and tell your children about the divorce as soon as you find out. You are not likely to be in the calm emotional state needed to sit down with your spouse and talk openly and supportively

with your children about what the future may hold. The emotional upset that often accompanies divorce is normal, but not conducive to reassuring your children.

Second, you may not have all the information you need immediately upon learning about the divorce. Your children will want to ask lots of questions (even if they don't ask them), and you need to have some answers before talking with them.

Third, the timing of when you tell your children will, in part, depend on the ages and developmental stages of each child. A three-year-old won't understand what you mean when you say, "We are getting divorced in one year, and there will be lots of changes."

And fourth, your children really don't have a need to know until a change in their lives is imminent. This means

that if you decide to get divorced, but will live together for six months until someone can move out, there is no need to tell the children right away. Although you want to give them some notice, you may choose to wait until you are closer to making a change in their lives. Again, let the ages and developmental level of your children guide your decision.

Why can't I tell them right away?

Sitting down with your children to discuss the divorce in a calm and reassuring way may simply be too difficult. Furthermore, refraining from blaming the other parent or in some way letting the child know that you didn't want the divorce could be extremely difficult.

Parents often say, "I don't lie to my children; they need to know the truth." But children don't need to know the truth about everything. Just as parents want their children to enjoy the excitement and joy of Christmas and thus tell them that Santa comes down the chimney, so too should children learn about the divorce without hearing all the gory details about your spouse's affair and your hurt feelings. There is no benefit to exposing your children to intimate details about the breakdown of your marriage. And it certainly is not in your child's best interest to worry about these things.

Think about what your goal is in talking with your children. Is your goal to tell your child the whole truth or is it to help your child cope with the coming divorce and foster the best possible relationship with both parents? It's up to you. However, research clearly shows that children do best in the long run when they have ongoing loving relationships with both parents and there is minimal family conflict.

Before you sit down to talk with your children about the coming divorce, have as many answers for them as possible. Your children will want to know where they will live, with whom they will live, and will they still see the other parent. They may ask, "Why are you getting divorced?" and "Whose fault is it?" They will want to know where their pets will stay, where their bed will be, and will their grandparent still take care of them on Mondays. What about school and friends? They will want to know about both. While you may not know all of the answers to these questions, you should be prepared to answer some of them or explain when you will have answers to their questions. Think about all of these decisions ahead of time.

As word of your divorce spreads among family and friends, you want to make sure that your children hear it from you. When to talk with your children will depend on each child's age and developmental level and when changes in family living arrangements are expected to occur. Older children may need to know sooner than younger children.

In addition, older children understand time better than younger children. They understand what it means when you tell them that mom or dad will be moving out in one, two, or three months. Older children also need to plan for

Exactly what do I say?

Following are some things you may wish to say in discussing the divorce with your children.

- "Your mom/dad and I are getting divorced." or
"We are getting divorced."
- "You know we have been arguing a lot for a long time. We tried our best to make it work, but decided we need to get divorced. While we know this may not be what you want, it is what we must do."
- "This has nothing to do with you. I know you may think this is your fault, but it's not in any way."
- "We both love you and will make sure that you get to spend a lot of time with both of us."
- "You are going to be living with me during the week, and see your mother/father every other weekend, from Thursday to Monday, and see him/her at other times as well." *Don't use the word "visit"—you don't visit with a parent, you see them and live with them on some days/nights.*
- "I know this is really hard for you."
- "I'm really sorry this is happening."
- "I'm going to be staying here at home, and your mom/dad will be moving to an apartment in a month." The other parent may add, "I'd like you to come with me to a store in a few days to help pick out furniture for your new room." *Although divorce is not fun for children, they can still be part of the process in a way that gives them a sense of control and allows them to have a little fun.*
- "The divorce is not your fault. There is nothing you could have done to prevent it and nothing you can do to change it. It's not about you."
- "This isn't about either of us doing something wrong, it's about us not being happy together for a long time and realizing that to be happy we need to be apart."

You may think this is your fault, but it's not in any way.

"We both love you very much. Anytime you have questions about what is happening, don't be afraid to ask. We may not know the answer, but we will always be here to talk with you about it."

"I know you wish we would stay married, but this is a decision your mom/dad and I have spent a lot of time making and we are not going to change it."

"Sometimes children think if they just act better and don't get in trouble, that moms and dads will stay married. That won't happen because our decision to get a divorce is not about you. Nothing you did had anything to do with our getting a divorce. We love you very much and tried very hard to stay together, but we are not going to stay married. We love you, and you will always be able to talk with either of us, no matter whose house you are at."

—S. R. R.

the future, so you don't want to tell a teenager the news a week before his or her life is about to change. Yet, with young children, such as a three-year-old, you may wait to discuss the divorce until a couple of weeks before the change.

In preparation for talking with your children, you may wish to consult with a therapist. A therapist can help you plan both what to say and when to say it, based on the children's needs and capacity to understand at different ages and developmental stages. In looking for a therapist, make sure to tell your lawyer and to select someone who has experience working with divorcing families so that he or she understands not just what you are going through, but what your children will be going through as well. You and your spouse should meet with the therapist together, if possible, to come up with a plan.

How do I tell them?

First and foremost, if you can, both parents should talk with their children together. As difficult as it may be, your job is to do what is best for your children. Even if you are angry with your spouse, you blame him or her for the divorce, or you just can't stand your spouse any more, you still must think about what is best for your children. In most cases, it is sitting down together and telling them.

When you discuss the divorce with your children, remember that your children's needs come first.

Your goal in telling them is to help your children understand that you are getting divorced, that you both love them and always will, that the divorce is not their fault, and that they can ask questions about what is happening. Letting them ask questions doesn't mean telling them the unbridled truth about everything (e.g., marital infidelity).

Parents are often afraid to let their children ask questions because they are not sure how to answer those questions. In one study, 23% of seven- to seventeen-year-olds said that no one had talked to them about their parents' divorce. Of those that were spoken to, only 17% percent were told by

their parents together, and 45% of them reported learning very little, such as "Daddy is leaving." Only 5% felt that they were fully informed and could ask questions. You want your children to be in this 5%.

What if there is a custody evaluation?

Unfortunately, some parents are unable to resolve parenting-schedule disputes through meetings with their attorneys or mediation. Although attempting to resolve most issues without going through a custody evaluation is encouraged, at times it is not possible. A custody evaluation is conducted by a mental health professional who will meet with parents and children to help come up with the best possible plan for the family. So what do I tell my children if I have to participate in a custody evaluation? It's actually not complicated. The best thing to do is to explain to your children that you and their mother/father are having a hard time deciding which days/nights you should be with each of us. "We both love you and want to spend as much time with you as possible. As a result, we are going to be meeting with someone who will help us figure it out. He or she will want to meet with you as well. She/he is going to give us advice as to what might be best so that we can make sure we are doing the right thing."

Conclusion

When you are ready to discuss the divorce with your children, remember that the most important rule is that your children's needs come first. Think about what is best for your children in terms of when you tell them, what you tell them, and how you tell them. While the above suggestions are general guidelines, there are situations in which general guidelines may not be the most appropriate ways to handle the situation.

For example, if a spouse is going to be incarcerated or one or both parents has a serious substance abuse problem or a history of child abuse, it is strongly recommended that you consult with a therapist to discuss what to tell the children, when, and how. (You may need only a couple of sessions.) Although meeting with a therapist might delay your talk with the children, you and your spouse will be in a much better position to help your children cope with the divorce. **FA**



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