

# Divorce — What to Tell the Kids

by Michael Becker

**D**ivorce causes pretty dramatic changes for us as adults, but it can be far scarier and can hold even more critical change for our children. Kids often don't know much about divorce, except for what they might gather from friends at school or on television. This can be outright wrong and often has little to do with their specific situation. Worse, it may unnecessarily scare them.

So the first two questions parents almost uniformly ask professionals are: "How should we tell the kids?"; and "When we tell them, what should we say?" The following is a guidemap for answering both questions.

## Tips on Breaking the News

**BE HONEST AND UP-FRONT.** Your children are smarter than you think. They've probably known for some time that your marriage wasn't working out, even though you might have done everything possible to keep up appearances. So when it is definite that you will be getting divorced, it's important for you to be straight-up and tell your children, for two major reasons.

The first is that news like this travels fast, and your children should never hear something so personal through anyone but their parents. Hearing this from another source can leave your children feeling abandoned and betrayed by you. Second, your honesty and directness can bring the kids closer to you. It bolsters your credibility with them, and enables them to feel more secure with you.

**DON'T BE AFRAID TO USE THE "D" WORD.** For some reason, people are afraid to use the word "divorce" when talking to their children about ... divorce. But this unnecessary avoidance can actually make the situation worse, not better. It makes children think that what's happening is a taboo subject, something that shouldn't be talked about. This can inhibit their ability to communicate with you and rely upon you for support now and in the future — isolating them in their own worries. Also, it leads them to believe that there is something defective about you, the situation, and, most importantly, them.

So when you talk to your children about divorce, use the word. It won't be the first time that they have heard it, and it will help them become more comfortable with you, themselves, and their changing situation. It will also communicate directly with your children, removing all doubt as to what is going on.

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**BE FIRM.** Almost all divorced children fantasize, to some degree or another, that their parents will reconcile. This is true for young children as well as adult children. However, your children must come to terms with the finality of your divorce to begin their own healing and recovery. Preserving in their minds the unfounded hope that their parents might become "un-divorced" does not allow them to move on. And leaving the door open to reconciliation in your child's mind would be cruel — by raising expectations which can't be met.

Hard as it may be to do, be firm with your children as to the certainty of the divorce. Let them know that this is a "fait accompli," and that there will be no bargaining. Though this may seem cruel, your children will thank you in the long run for your honesty and directness.

**DON'T TRY TO TAKE AWAY THE SADNESS.** It hurts us as parents to see our children sad, especially when we may have had a part in creating the sadness. This usually makes any parent feel incredibly guilty. And in the midst of this guilt, parents often make two mistakes: denying the sadness by saying, "It's not so bad"; or squelching children by not allowing them to express their sadness.



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Be very careful to avoid both pitfalls. First off, don't deny the sadness; if you do, you risk making your children believe their overwhelming emotion is not legitimate. This tells them that there is something defective about them. Second and equally important, allow, and even encourage, your children to feel sad. For kids, divorce is a lot about loss of the current family structure, and your children need to mourn the loss they're experiencing. It's an important step toward recovery. And, most importantly, listen to whatever they say with an emphatic ear. When children are listened to, they feel cared for.

**TELL THEM TOGETHER.** If at all possible, both parents – together – should tell the children. By the time you get to the point of divorcing, there has probably been so much conflict and unrest. Your children have been through a lot.

The mere act of telling your kids together reassures them that the worst is over. It tells them that your divorce won't be an awful mess, like the kinds of divorces they've heard about in school. And for both of you, this will be the first exercise in establishing a working "business relationship" so that you can successfully co-parent your children after your divorce. Though you will no longer be spouses, you will be parents and parents always.

### What to Say

**"WE'RE YOUR PARENTS – ALWAYS."** Stress that you both still love your children, and that they should absolutely feel free to still love both of you. Be clear that you are divorcing each other, not them. Nobody else can or will be their parents, and you wouldn't want it any other way.

This assures your children that they won't be forgotten or abandoned after your divorce – a very common fear for kids at this time. Also, your children come from both of you. If they can still love both of you, it is much easier for them to still love themselves.

**WHAT'S NEXT.** Kids need to know, as soon as possible, what their lives will look like during and after your divorce. This information enables them to feel more secure, less "at sea." It also tells them that their parents have thought about them.

As soon as you can, stress future planning with your children. And the more specific you can be, the better. For example, let them know who will pick them up after school, attend their extra-curricular activities, etc. Also, if either of you will be moving out, let them know when. Be sure to tell them when they will see this parent and be as specific as possible. Some parents have found using a calendar with the days and times of visits laid out especially helpful because it is so concrete. Emphasize that there are lots of ways to keep in touch, such as telephone, fax, e-mail, video conferencing, and videos – and explain your

thoughts on potential ways of using these mechanisms. But don't over-promise, which you may do if you're feeling especially guilty, and absolutely be certain to follow through on what you promise.

**JUST THE FACTS.** Your children may ask why you are getting divorced. Or, you may be tempted to tell them. In a word - don't.

All your children need to know is that you don't love each other any more, that you will not be living together, and they can still love both of you because both of you still love them. Telling the children the details just lays adult problems - that they can't solve anyway - on their shoulders. It can also force them to choose a side, experts agree.

**THEY'RE NOT RESPONSIBLE.** Unless you tell them otherwise, your children will likely blame themselves for your breakup. This can be extremely upsetting to them, and can last for many years, into adulthood. Be certain to tell them - in plain, simple, and direct language - that this is not their fault. They had nothing to do with it period. And repeat it, over and again. Also, explain that the reason for your divorce lies with you - that you both tried very hard to make things work, but you made mistakes along the way.

**KEEP A LID ON IT.** Be very careful to avoid nasty fights, especially about your children, during (and after) your divorce. When your children know you are arguing over them, they may confirm in their minds the incorrect notion that they are the root cause of the divorce. Many children, hearing their parents fighting over them, have thought, "Boy, if I weren't part of the equation, maybe the whole divorce might not have happened at all."

An excellent way to resolve the issues presented in your divorce without the nastiness and fighting is through mediation, in which divorcing spouses meet with a neutral professional to work out a fair, legally binding, out-of-court settlement. This settlement must be approved by a judge, so it has to be similar to one you might reach after years of litigation. A mediator protects both spouses - by requiring goodfaith discussion without the strong-arming, coercion, and manipulation sometimes exerted in lawsuits.

**NO FINGER POINTING.** Whether you both tell your children together or separately, be certain not to blame each other. Doing so only forces the children to choose between parents, one of the cruelest things any parent can do to a child. Instead, let them know that you both are responsible for what happened, and that you both think it is best to no longer be married to each other.

Also, it is very common for one parent to want the divorce more than the other. No matter what, don't mention this to your children. This is just another form of finger pointing, with an implied request to choose one parent over the other.

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