

# divorce matters

## Talking with children

Among the first questions parents must answer in a separation or divorce are how, when, and what to tell their children. Because telling children may be painful, parents could be tempted to delay this task. It is usually better for children, however, to know about the decision immediately, and before a parent moves.

The way this information is presented can set the tone for a child's response. If possible, both parents should tell each of their children about the divorce at the same time.

Although individual response may vary, parents need to know that children will be anxious and worried about what this situation means. They need to think about several questions.

### What do children need to know?

- They did not cause the divorce.
- Neither parent is rejecting them.
- They still have a family even though their parents will no longer be married.
- Their parents will love them forever, even though their feelings for each other have changed.
- Their parents will continue to take care of them.

### Tips for Helping Children Through Divorce

- Be as honest with them as possible.
- Acknowledge their feelings.
- Discuss upcoming changes with them.
- Give them reassurance and a sense of security.
- Be fair when discussing their other parent.
- Provide them as much stability as possible.
- Support and encourage their individual interests.
- Trust their ability to adapt.
- Tell them both of their parents love them.

- There is a reason for the divorce. Parents should agree on an explanation in advance, remembering that too many details may confuse children.
- Some things will stay the same and others will change. Common questions children might ask are who will they live with, when will they see the other parent and family members such as grandparents, and where will they go to school.

## What don't children need to know?

Unless the other parent is a genuine threat, children shouldn't know anything that might negatively affect that relationship. Parents need to be truthful with their children, but should avoid discussing issues such as money or extramarital affairs with them.

## What do children worry about?

- Children worry about the parent who is leaving: Where will Dad live? How will Mom manage? Will Dad be safe? Will Mom be comfortable and happy?
- Children worry that they will be forced to take sides by their parents, grandparents, or other family members.
- Children worry that they will have to choose one parent over the other.
- Children worry about how family occasions such as birthdays and holidays will be celebrated.
- Children worry about disrupted routines. Who will take care of them when they're sick? Who will take them to soccer practice or piano lessons? Who will sign their report cards?

Parents should ask their children what they are worried about, recognizing that children might not be able to identify their concerns initially.

## What can parents do to reassure children?

- Once parents have identified their children's concerns, they should try to respond honestly to them. Important decisions such as living arrangements should be shared as soon as they are made.
- Children need to know their parents will consider their feelings when making important decisions.

- Because divorce is upsetting to everyone, they need to assure their children that things will work out and life will improve.

## How can parents help children during a divorce?

Following is a list of ways you can help your children survive your divorce. Check off the ones you have done and circle the ones you plan to do.

### Reassurance

- Assure your children that the divorce was not their fault.
- Assure your children that both parents love them.
- Tell your children that it's OK to feel sad because they miss their other parent.

### Stability

- Maintain the individual relationships you have with each of your children. Encourage the other parent to do the same.
- Stick to a daily routine with your children.
- Make changes in your children's lives slowly, letting them discuss these changes with you. Reward your children for their efforts in making these changes.

### Encouragement

- Encourage your children to play with friends and participate in other age-appropriate activities.
- Encourage your children to continue to pursue their interests.

### Fairness

- Do not ask your children, either directly or indirectly, which parent they love more.
- Be fair in sharing your children's time with their other parent.

## Honesty

- Acknowledge that your children may want you and your former spouse to reunite. Do not encourage or support this wish.
- Talk with your children honestly about any changes that will affect them before they occur.

## Support

- Support your children's need to visit their other parent.
- Support your children's desire to love both of you. Tell them it's OK.

## Security

- Don't use your children as a counselor or source of emotional support. Seeing parents needy and dependent may make children feel insecure. Find an adult who can fulfill these needs for you.
- Remind your children that you and your former spouse will still take care of them.

## Trust

- Show your children that you trust their ability adapt to these changes.

## What shouldn't parents say?

Following is a list of destructive remarks that you should not make to your children. If you find yourself saying words like these, stop and think about how they might affect your children. All of these remarks raise fear and anxiety.

- "If you don't behave, I'll send you to live with your father."
- "You're lazy/stubborn/bad tempered, just like your mother."
- "I could get along better here by myself."

- "If you weren't here, I could..."
- "Sometimes I wish I'd been the one to skip out."
- "Your father put you up to saying that."
- "Your mom doesn't love any of us or she wouldn't have left us."
- "You can't trust him."
- "She was just no good."
- "If he loved you, he would send your support checks on time."
- "If your mother is five minutes late again, you're just not going with her."
- "If you don't like what I buy you, ask your father to do better."
- "Who would you really rather be with, Mommy or Daddy?"
- "What is your mother saying about me?"
- "Now that you're the little man/little woman of the house..."
- "Someday you'll leave me too, just like your father. Promise me that you'll never leave."
- "You're all I have. You're the only person I can rely on."
- "Over my dead body!"

## References

- Wallerstein, Judith S. and Joan Berlin Kelly. 1980. *Surviving the Breakup: How Children and Parents Cope With Divorce*. Basic Books.
- Wallerstein, Judith S. and Sandra Blakeslee. 1990. *Second Chances: Men, Women and Children A Decade After Divorce - Who Wins, Who Loses - and Why*. Ticknor & Fields, N.Y.

**Additional resources from the  
“Divorce Matters” series available  
through the Extension Store,  
*store.extension.iastate.edu*:**

- Visitation dos and don'ts (PM 1641)
- Coping with stress and change (PM 1637)
- A child's view (PM 1639)
- Talking with your child's other parent (PM 1640)

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