

LifeSkills

How to tell children about your separation or divorce

When parents agree to separate, one of their more difficult tasks is telling the children. No matter how uncomfortable this makes you feel as parents, it is a vital step in providing children the support they need to deal with the confusion such news may create for them.

Tell the children together

When both parents together tell the children, it lets them know that despite the separation, they will not be abandoned. Their father will still be their father and their mother will still be their mother.

Don't wait till the last minute

Tell the children of the separation as soon as you have decided the date on which the parent who is leaving will move out. This allows the children time to adjust to the fact that one of their parents will no longer be living with them.

However, telling the children too far in advance and before any final decisions have been made only prolongs the transition and children may come to think it will never happen.

Tell the truth but keep it simple

Children don't need to know everything. Give them the basic reasons for your separation, whether it is that you have grown apart, or no longer love each other, or if one or both of you has met someone else.

Remember, you have the right to protect your intimate life from questions, from older children in particular. Point out to your children that they enjoy the same right of privacy in their intimate life.

Provide direct and honest answers

Whatever the reasons for your separation, your children will want to know more and will ask questions. Let them know they are welcome to ask questions and that they will get honest answers. Remember, it is easier in the long run for them to come to terms with the truth than it is for them to live with their fantasies which are usually more frightening than reality.

Be patient if your children ask the same question over and over again.

This may express a real need for information, but it may also be their way of processing the information. It helps them accept the situation and their feelings about it. Keep your answers short and simple.

Give them the specifics

Understanding the practical consequences of your separation is important for the child's sense of security. Among other things, they need to know:

- Which parent will no longer be living in the home;
- When the parent is leaving;
- Where the parent will live;
- Where the children will live;
- What the custody and visiting arrangements are.

Acknowledge the child's feelings

For children, separation or divorce means the loss of their intact family, and therefore it affects their sense of security. In addition to sadness, children may feel anger, guilt, and abandonment. Be sensitive to your children's emotional reactions. Encourage them to express their feelings. Let them know you understand and that it's OK to have those feelings.

Avoid conflict in front of the children

Research shows that children of divorced parents are often as emotionally and psychologically healthy as children in a stable relationship, as long as they are not exposed to parental conflicts. It is important that you as parents do not bring the children into your quarrels and disagreements.

This is often difficult, but worth the effort. While separation and divorce are painful for children, it is an emotional wound that can be healed. On the other hand, seeing their parents in frequent conflict can leave more lasting scars.

Reassure the children

Children need a lot of reassurance at a time like this. Make sure they understand:

- The separation is not their fault, that they are not responsible and they did nothing to cause it;
- Even if the parents no longer love one another, they still love the children and will always be there for them;
- Their mother and father loved each other when they married and very much wanted the children;
- Their mother and father still love them and will always keep them safe and secure.

Professional help

If your child's behavior changes in significant ways after the separation, for example, if they no longer want to see their friends, develop eating disorders, have sleeping problems, or other behavioral difficulties, you should probably seek professional help.

Suggested readings

If you would like to read more on this topic, we recommend the following publications:

Gardner, Richard A. *The parents book about divorce*. New Jersey: Creative Therapeutics 1991.
Ministry of Health Canada. *Because life goes on—Helping children and youth live with separation and divorce: a guide for parents*. This booklet was prepared by the Ministry of National Health and Welfare and published in 1994. It is available free of charge from the Ministry of Health Canada (consult your local phone directory).

The English version of this document is also available on the Internet.

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