



Telling Your Kids About Your Divorce

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By Stephen F. McDonough, Massachusetts Divorce Attorney & Mediator at The Divorce Collaborative LLC. I would also like to acknowledge two experienced and caring mental health practitioners that I frequently work with, Dr. Sandy Portnoy and Betsy Ross, LICSW, CGP. They provided insights about this topic during many divorce mediation and collaborative divorce sessions.

And you thought the birds and bees talk was going to be stressful.

Telling your children about your divorce is a difficult conversation that parents dread. Basically, the key to speaking to your children about your divorce is the same as if you were painting a room – **it is all about the preparation.**

Thus, you and your spouse should talk together first, and agree on the following "Four Ws":

- Who will tell them?
- When will you tell your children?

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- What will you tell them?
- Why – Be prepared for the “Why are you and Mommy/Daddy getting a divorce?” question.

Obviously, there are variables to consider when speaking to your children about your divorce. You must consider their age, maturity level, personality, and their concerns about security. Try to anticipate how they might react and what questions to prepare for.

Let’s look at each of the above in more detail so you and your spouse can get your script together.

WHO? – It is preferred that you and your spouse talk to your children together. It sends the best message – although the marriage is ending, you can still cooperate as parents. Even if your situation does not allow for a joint conversation parents should together discuss what they each will say separately to the kids and stick to the plan. Remember, this is about the kids, so try and speak with them together if possible.

WHEN? – The timing of this discussion should be considered. During a recent mediation at our Bedford, MA office the parents decided to tell their child during the school vacation week between Christmas and New Year’s. That way their child had time to digest the news (they expected him to be very surprised) before returning to school, but would not be upset during Christmas. Kids react differently, but it is probably best to avoid having this discussion the night before an important exam, game, or recital. If one parent will be moving out, consider having the discussion a week or two beforehand. This allows a child to maintain a sense of routine while considering what lies ahead, and both parents are in

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close proximity to answer follow up questions and to check-in about the upcoming transition from time to time.

WHAT? – This is where some parents start getting panicky. What do we say to our kids? What *shouldn't* we say? Remember that your children – even older children – do not need to know every detail. Here are some guidelines to consider, and keep the ages of your children in mind.

1) Be clear. Tell your kids that you and your spouse are getting a divorce. Younger kids may not understand the term, so you will have to package the information so they understand it. For example, “Your Dad and I won’t be living together.” Try to avoid excessive emotion as that might make a child more concerned and complicate communications.

2) Let your kids know what they can expect. Kids will be thinking about what this news means to them. Try to anticipate these concerns. Where will I live, will I be switching schools? Where will Mom and Dad live? Will I have time with both parents? Let children know what is coming up next. For example, “I will be moving out next week to a different house 15 minutes away. Your dad will be staying here. You will have lots of time with both of us and you will have two homes. You will still go to the same school.” If you and your spouse have agreed on a parenting schedule, you can share the basics, but don’t overload them with too much information at the first conversation.

3) Tell your child that the divorce is not about them. Kids sometimes feel guilty, worrying they caused the divorce. Make sure they know this is about the adults, not anything they did. Reinforce to your children that they still have two parents who love them.

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4) Explain to your kids that they will be alright, and that both parents are going to be alright. It is perfectly fine to acknowledge to your child that you understand this is upsetting news and it is okay to be sad. Besides worrying about themselves, children worry about their parents.

5) Ask your kids if they have any questions and how are they feeling? Don't be surprised if there are none right away, or there might be a lot.

6) Make sure your kids know they can come to either parent anytime to talk or ask questions. Follow up with them periodically, but there is not a need to overdo it.

WHY? – Be prepared for your kids to ask why you are getting divorced or separating. Don't go into sordid details. Best to answer with something such as "Sometimes grown ups' feelings change." Certainly do not blame the other parent, even if you really want to. You can also acknowledge that although you do not love each other in the same way, you and your spouse still respect each other and you will remain involved parents. You could also mention that you have not been getting along for sometime, and that neither spouse is happy. Sometimes older children have sensed this or kids may have been exposed to lots of arguing, so they may not be surprised by the news.

After you have talked to your kids, check in with them from time to time to see how they are doing. Be on the lookout for significant or lasting behavioral changes, including lower grades, aggression, or if your child is isolating herself in her room instead of enjoying time with friends. Depending on the ages of your children and their own wishes (if they are old enough to express them) you may want to discuss letting teachers and close friends know.

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With some preparation, you and your spouse will get through this unpleasant but necessary task in a manner that will help your kids prepare for the changes ahead in a supportive way. After some time passes, they should be fine. If you are worried or they do not seem to be doing well, then consult an experienced mental health practitioner who can help with the transition.

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