

Talking with Your Children About Divorce

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Many parents dread the moment they tell their children they are getting a divorce. They fear their own emotions and the reactions they imagine their children will have. However, this conversation can be held in a healthy way that provides emotional connection and security. The following guidelines will help.

Plan Ahead

Ideally, this conversation will happen with both parents present. If one parent has already talked with the children, call a family meeting with both present to talk further so that the children can experience a healthy message from both parents. In addition, both parents should play an equal role in the conversation. Sometimes one parent is much more talkative or more comfortable with emotional topics and in those situations that parent can dominate the conversation. This inadvertently sends the message that the other parent is not involved or is not handling the change as well. Many parents find it helpful to plan in advance, making a general “script” of which parents will share which pieces of information.

Consider Timing

While there is no exact science regarding when to tell your children about your divorce, it is important to give some thought to timing. It’s best to give children some time to process the new information with both parents present in the home. For example, about two weeks before one parent moves out is a good time. On the other hand, telling children that you will divorce, and then remaining together for months increases children’s anxiety (when is it going to happen?) and prevents them from finding closure and moving on to a secure new version of your family (have they changed their mind?).

If your family is in turmoil or there is a high level of conflict that the children are aware of, it is best to go ahead and have a conversation with the children even if it will be an extended time before somebody moves out. In that case, talk with the children about their awareness of the arguing or difficult times in the family. Let them know you love them, the arguments are not because of them, and you are working on what to do to make things better for the family. If your child asks you if you are going to get a divorce, you can say that you do not know for sure yet what will happen, but you do know you are going to make sure they are loved and taken care of. Invite your children to share with you anytime they feel scared or sad while you are going through this process, and check in with them regularly about their feelings.

Tell The Truth

When you are ready to tell them about the divorce, the first step is to be honest about what is happening. Tell the truth, but keep it simple. “We have something important to share with you. You have noticed that we have been going through some hard times in our family and Mom and I/Dad and I have not been getting along well. We have worked hard on this problem, but have decided it is best for us not to be married anymore. We are getting a divorce.”

It is also important to explain to children that the divorce is an adult matter and an adult decision that has nothing to do with them. Explaining that it is about feelings between the two of you alone can help prevent children from assuming the problem was caused by them or their behavior.

Don't Tell the Whole Truth

The reasons adults get divorced are painful and often complicated. Children are not equipped developmentally or emotionally to understand those details, even though they may ask you for the reasons for your divorce when you talk with them about it. Here are some possible appropriate responses when children ask “why?”.

- “Sometimes adults have grown up problems that keep them from getting along well.”
- “Sometimes parents do not have the same kind of married love they used to have, and find it is better for them to be just friends.”
- “The problems we have are grown up problems that are not about you.”

It is especially important not to tell the full story if there has been an affair or betrayal. Remember that leaving information out of what you share with a child is not the same as lying. The parent who has been betrayed may feel they want to explain to their children that it is not their fault. While this is an understandable wish, it is harmful to children. When children are aware one of their parents is against the other, or terribly hurt by the other, they cannot help but feel they must choose sides. For example, if a child’s mother hates their father, the child cannot understand how they will be able to love their father without hurting their mother. Children need both parents, especially after divorce, and choosing sides interferes with this very important need.

If your divorce is not a mutual decision, it is particularly challenging to keep what you share with children healthy and appropriate. Many parents feel they want their children to know the divorce was not their decision and they would never willingly do this to their children. However, it is important to present the divorce as a decision that both of you are a part of. If you do not want the divorce at all, you can say something truthful such as “Even though it is sad and will take a little while to get used to, we both realize this is what has to happen.” Children who know the details of which parent wants the divorce and which does not are often burdened with overwhelming feelings of fear and anger. This prevents them from resolving their sadness about the divorce and moving forward in a positive way.

Allow Feelings and Questions

It is helpful to directly tell children that it is OK to be sad, angry, or any other feelings they are having. Sharing that you are feeling sad can also be helpful as long as there is not a dramatic display of emotion. This is an opportunity to model healthy expression of feelings by sharing them and showing you are OK.

Reassure Without Sugar Coating

In addition to sharing feelings honestly, it is important to provide reassurance that everything will be OK. One of the positive predictors for a good outcome for children post-divorce is that they know their parents are doing well. Here are some examples of reassuring statements:

- “I am sad too, but I know everything is going to be OK.”
- “I know we have enough love in our family to get through this.”
- “Mom/Dad and I are going to work together to make sure you have everything you need.”

In addition, emphasize that a lot is going to change, but some things will not change at all: the children will still see both of you; you will still be taking care of them and loving them. If you and your spouse are still in a friendly relationship, say so. For example “Even though we know it is not best for us to be married, we still care about and respect each other as friends and are going to work together as a team to take care of you.”

Although it is comforting to provide reassurance, it is **not** helpful to try so hard to make children feel better that you present a false positive. Examples of this include “This will be great! You get two Christmases/Hanukkahs!” or “Now you get to decorate two rooms!” or “There is nothing to be sad about.” Statements like this tell children their naturally sad feelings are silly or wrong.

Provide the Information You Have About the Future

Ideally, you will have at least some general information about how life is going to be after the divorce. This can be as general as, “You are going to have lots of time with each of us.” to a very specific residential schedule. You may also know if one parent is going to move out, who that will be, and about how far away their new home is going to be. Whether or not the children will change schools is also a critical piece of information for children. Share the details you have – this provides awareness that there is a plan, and even better that you have worked together to create one you both feel good about.

It is likely you will not have all the details worked out at the time you talk with your children. Share with them that some things are still going to be decided, and the two of you are going to work together to make those decisions and you will tell them as soon as you know. Invite their input and concerns, but do not imply they will get to make the decisions themselves – that is too much pressure and children are not capable of making those important decisions themselves.

The Value of “I Don’t Know”

You might be concerned that your children will ask you a question you do not know the answer to, or do know the answer to but are not sure how to explain it appropriately. It’s fine to simply say “I do not know the answer to that yet, but I will work on it and talk with you about it later.” or “I will need to think about that a little so I can make sure to explain it to you in the best way later.” Consult with your therapist or coach for assistance if needed.

Follow Up

One conversation is not enough. A few days after your first family meeting, check in with the children individually. Share with them that you know they must have a lot of thoughts, feelings and questions about the divorce and you are ready to talk about them with them. Even if they do not

want to talk about it, they are learning that you are capable of helping them and not afraid of their feelings or this change. Continue these follow up opportunities every week or two for at least a couple of months. They can happen with both parents or with just one at a time.

In Summary

Telling your children you are getting a divorce is difficult, but can be done in a way that supports and helps them make the transition to a new family structure successfully.

If you have questions or a complicated family situation, seek help from a therapist who is experienced in children and divorce.

McConaghie Counseling is a psychotherapy practice in Alpharetta, GA.

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Tracy McConaghie, LCSW, RPT and her husband, Andrew, own McConaghie Counseling. She specializes in child counseling, helping children and families with anxiety, behavior problems, divorce and parenting. Contact her at admin@mcconaghiecounseling.com



Additionally, Tracy and Andrew developed the Upside Down Divorce process, a collaborative and child focused approach to divorce. Learn more at www.upsidedowndivorce.com

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