

more practical, proven strategies for developing strong and enduring relationships with children and effective ways to communicate with them—even when they may be afraid to ask questions or do not know what to ask.

## Preparing Children for Changes: Some Broad Guidelines

Preparing children for the emotional and logistical changes that lie ahead is important for two reasons. First, it gives them the information about what is happening in their lives—information that helps to assuage many of the fears and worries that accompany this major change in their lives. Second, this preparation helps to shape future events in a positive way.

*When to tell.* Deciding *when* to tell children can be as difficult a decision as *what* to tell them. One factor to consider is how certain you are about your decision to end your marriage. The process of reaching the decision to divorce is often filled with overwhelming and sometimes conflicting emotions. So it is best to tell the children after your decision to separate is final, rather than while you are in the throes of an argument or still determining how to solve your marital problems.

Once your decision to divorce is final and you have worked out what you will say to your children, plan a family meeting for a time when you, their other parent, and all the children can sit down together without limits imposed by meetings, school activities, or other commitments, and when no one is too tired, sick, or hungry. Some children may react immediately, with questions, fears, tears, or anger. Others—particularly when there has been little conflict in their presence and the divorce comes as a complete shock—may say little or nothing at first, as they are often stunned and disbelieving. Their questions and reactions may tumble out over a period of time. Even if you anticipate the latter, allowing plenty of time for this family

meeting communicates to children that this all-important decision is being treated with seriousness and that you want and expect them to talk about their feelings, concerns, and questions. If it is possible to have this important family meeting at home, children then have the option of spending some time alone in their own rooms later on, if they wish.

It is helpful for children if you plan this family meeting for a time when both parents will be available to talk with each child one-on-one later that day and for several days afterward. Each conversation provides an opportunity for parents to reassure the children and express unending love for them. If one parent immediately moves out of the house or departs for a business trip, children often fear that parent is leaving them, too.

In addition to the logistics of the schedule, it is wise—although often difficult—to plan for a time when you both have the emotional wherewithal to provide reassurance and encouragement for your children. This is not to suggest that you hold your tears in check, but that you are emotionally able to focus your full attention on your children and respond to their needs.

The age of the children influences the time frame for telling them, too, and ranges from about two weeks to a month or two. For young children of preschool and primary school age, it is generally best to tell them about two to three weeks before a parent moves out of the home. Older children and adolescents may need more time to plan and process how the changes will affect them, and telling them a month or two before a parent leaves gives them the opportunity to ask questions and plan for whatever changes will occur.

In planning the timing of this emotional conversation, you give your children a real gift by avoiding special occasions like birthdays and major holidays. The memories of these occasions are forever tainted if bad news is associated with them. It saddens me deeply when I hear children say, “They told me on Christmas. They turned the time when I was always happiest into a season that will make me sad for the rest of my life.” Unfortunately, I hear variations on this

theme all too often, as birthdays, Thanksgiving, Passover, Christmas, and other occasions around which families build joyful traditions are transformed into times of sadness and loss.

*The big message.* A single fundamental message is the foundation for all of the explanations and discussions that follow: “Whatever changes take place between Mom and Dad, one thing that will not change is our love for you. We will always be your parents and we will continue to take good care of you. Both of us love you very much, and the kind of love we have for you is the kind that will never end.” Such a message provides children of all ages with a powerful core of reassurance and stability that allows them to deal more confidently—although still sadly—with the major changes in their lives.

Physical contact helps to reinforce this loving message. Sitting close to your children so you can reach out to hug or touch them helps them to feel your nurturing presence during this intensely emotional time.

Children may not always reveal how important your message of enduring love is to them, or how frequently they need to hear it. But telling them again and again and sustaining the message with actions throughout their lives are great sources of comfort and confidence.

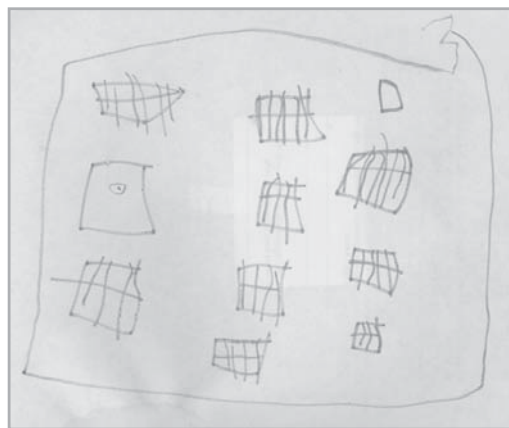
*What else to say.* Children are better able to cope with life-changing news when you let them know that you have had a difficult time making this major decision, and that you are not undertaking the divorce lightly. While the message needs to be tailored to children’s ages, the fundamental theme is that you’ve had serious problems in your marriage that you have been unable to solve. These problems have nothing to do with the children—they did not cause them and they cannot fix or change them.

If both of you agree that one of the best parts of your marriage is your children, then it is comforting for children to hear you say so. They also need to know that your paramount concern is to take good care of them. They are further reassured when you continue to live this promise by keeping their needs a top priority and not introducing additional changes and new partners into their lives too quickly.

Establishing a stable home and family life with structure, warmth, and limits, and staying connected to children as an authoritative parent go a long way toward helping children to feel “normal,” secure, and loved.

*Explain what will happen next.* Children of all ages benefit from advance notice and preparation for the changes that soon will occur in their family. Telling them about the separation or divorce is the first step in a communication process that continues for many years. Children’s uncertainty about what will happen to them and to the two people they love best in the world is exceedingly stressful for them. As they try to absorb the news in that first conversation, children need to know that they will continue to have a home and their parents’ ongoing love, attention, and guidance. They also find it reassuring to know some of the specifics about what will happen to them.

It is ideal if you have made some preliminary plans before you tell the children about your plans to divorce. Then you can share the most important facts of their immediate future—where each parent will live, where the children will live, and approximately when they will see each parent. Having this information helps to allay their biggest concern—what will happen to me? Children who are not given information about family changes nor explicitly told that their parents will continue to take care of them often fill in the gaps with their own worst fear—that their parents might leave them, too.



If it is not possible to have a general plan in place at this time, it is helpful to tell your children that you are working on this together and will take into account their needs, schedules, and input as you make plans for their time with each parent.

*Tell the children together.* Children benefit if you are able to break the news of your pending separation together, if at all possible. I understand how very difficult this can be, particularly when your own emotions are raw.

After an especially emotional meeting in which Jerry and Suzanne worked out the details of how and when to tell their children, Suzanne expressed their shared hopes for the future and their commitment to working together on behalf of their children. “Once we focused on a plan for making sure our children were our priority, telling them—and the divorce itself—became more bearable to contemplate. It’s all about them. We want to make sure they know how deeply we both love them, and know that both of us will always be their parents—in every sense of the word.”

Making careful, well-considered decisions together about what to tell the children is best accomplished when you can make enough quiet, private time to have thoughtful conversations and agree on the ways and the words that are just right for each of you. As you undertake this planning together, you may find it helpful to think about your own relationship in a new way—as professional partners in the extremely important job you must work at together, now and for the rest of your lives, parenting your children. Making such a transition demands enormous self-control, sound judgment, and sensitivity, but is easier to manage if you can view it as an investment in your children’s healthy development, and hence well worth your time and effort. More information about how to develop an effective, business-like, coparenting relationship is included in chapter 5.

Because it is often hard to set aside all the issues that led them to part ways, many parents find it helpful to consult with a mental health professional who specializes in families and divorce. Together, they

can find the optimal ways for the parents to talk with their children and prepare them for the changes that lie ahead.

*But sometimes it is necessary to tell them alone.* Sometimes, of course, it is either not wise or not possible for parents to break the news to their children together. When one parent leaves without notice, talking together with the children is, of course, impossible.

If the degree of volatility or hostility between parents is extremely high, it may be impossible for them to sit down together for this conversation with their children. If there is a history of violence or the safety of children or a parent is in question for any reason, the parent's first priority is always to protect the children. If telling the children together has the potential to become violent, then one parent must tell the children alone. Children need that parent's reassurance that they will be cared for and safe, and the parent needs to take the steps necessary to ensure their safety.

In any situation when parents cannot tell the children together, the parent who takes responsibility for telling the children about the separation explains what will and will not change in their lives. Particularly in these situations, children need to be reassured that this parent is wholeheartedly committed to caring for them and keeping them safe. Chapter 5 provides information on parallel parenting practices that may be adopted to minimize opportunities for conflict.

*Avoid the rumor mill.* Children need to hear the news of your divorce directly from you. Over the years, I have heard painful stories from children who learned about the possibility of their parents' divorce from a grandparent, aunt, uncle, cousin, or close family friend. Others learned the news from peers who had overheard their parents repeating a rumor. In all cases, these children understandably felt betrayed. Hearing about their parents' divorce from someone else undermined a fundamental sense of trust and honesty at the very time when they most needed the security of a strong and loving relationship with both parents.

The only foolproof way to protect your children from hearing the news secondhand is to make sure that no one hears about your decision

before your children do. Telling family, friends, and neighbors is the next tier of communication. In some cases, it is helpful to tell adults who are close to your children very soon after you tell your children, so they can talk with these trusted individuals about their feelings and fears.

Because the decision to divorce is such a major one, however, you may need a trusted confidante who provides a listening ear and support during this difficult time. If you have a friend or family member in whom you can entrust such personal information, insist that they keep it confidential. Other safe alternatives are to have such discussions with a licensed mental health professional who specializes in marriage and family issues. Not only are people considering divorce assured of the privacy of their conversations, but they also benefit from the support of an experienced therapist.

Many individuals want to share their thoughts and feelings with other close family and friends. While having support is unquestionably helpful, my caution is to confide in people who can be completely trusted to keep confidences and are able to be discreet. Even a single overheard remark can cause children unnecessary fear and worry.

Sometimes friends and family, out of a sense of loyalty and love for you, may unwittingly contribute to conflict and animosity—and to your children's distress—by taking sides and criticizing the other parent. To prevent or minimize this additional burden for children, I often recommend that both parents tell their friends and family that, for the sake of their children, they want to handle the divorce in the most respectful way possible, and ask for their full support in this. It is also advisable to explicitly ask them to discuss your family matters with no one else, and particularly to make it clear that you want to be sure that your children hear the news from you before they hear it from anyone else. If these are people who are important to your children, it is important to let them know when you will tell the children and what messages you want the children to hear from them.

*Tell your children without “telling on” your former partner.* Four out of five divorces are not by mutual choice, so in a great many situations, the spouse who is left feels abandoned, betrayed, painfully sad,

deeply hurt, and often very angry. In such cases, this parent may want the children to share their belief that “we are all being left” and to see themselves as injured parties, too. In nonmutual divorces or high-conflict situations, it can be very difficult to avoid making blame, vengeance, rage, or sarcasm part of telling the children. “I don’t know why you are so mad at me, this was entirely your mother’s idea—I had nothing to do with it,” or “I know how sad and angry you are—I’m devastated by his selfishness, too, since your father left us for her.”

It is all too easy to slip across the line from “telling the children” to “telling on” their other parent. While a parent may feel justified in telling children about their other parent’s faults, this knowledge jeopardizes their relationship with both parents over time. Information about a parent’s affair or character flaws is painful and corrosive for children and puts them in the untenable position of having to decide which parent is the good guy, and which is the one to blame, to the detriment of their own healthy development. Very often, one outcome of too much negative information about their parents’ divorce is for children to have misgivings about ever trusting someone enough to commit to a long-term relationship of their own. Ultimately, it is children who suffer most when they are directly or indirectly pitted against a parent. Blaming fuels conflict and puts children on a path toward jeopardizing their relationship with a parent, which can create enduring problems.

Children in our support groups or the privacy of therapy often talk about how overwhelmed and troubled they feel when their parents share the details of their adult problems, or describe the other parent’s faults or limitations. When children role-play being “experts” on divorce, they inevitably offer this advice to parents: “Tell us about the changes in our family and what will happen to us, but *please* spare us the gory details.”

When children hear that their world is about to change in a major way, they urgently need their parents to focus on loving and nurturing them, and not to be pulled into the middle of their hurt and anger. Except in situations of abuse or violence, children benefit when each parent helps them to maintain a good relationship with the other and



avoids alienating them from their other parent. In so doing, parents also earn their children's respect for taking the high road. Many parents find this mantra helps them to focus on what is most important, especially in the early days of a breakup when emotions are intense: "My children need me to love them more than I hate my former partner right now."

If you are struggling with the desire to "tell all," you may find it helps to put these feelings into perspective by envisioning how you want your children to think about their family in the years ahead. As a loving parent, you want your children to benefit from the certainty that both of their parents have deeply loved and cared for them, and not for them to feel trapped in the middle of your conflict. By imagining your children in ten years and focusing on what will make them happy and confident, you may be better able to contain your own hurt or anger and speak respectfully and positively about your children's other parent.

Fostering a good relationship with the other parent is not a favor to your former partner, but a lifelong gift to your children. Research has shown that children who maintain strong relationships with both parents after a divorce are much more likely to have a loving relationship and marriage in the future than those who have been estranged from one of their parents.

How much information you give your children about the divorce should be based on their age and level of maturity, of course. But by focusing on the desired outcome for your children, you can probably avoid telling them stories they will wish they had never heard. In these cases, less is always much, much more.

## The Best Ways to Handle Some of the Most Difficult Situations

Divorce is almost never easy, but some situations are far more difficult than the "average" breakup. There are proven ways to help children through these particularly difficult adjustments.

*When one parent leaves abruptly.* When one parent leaves suddenly,