

Telling your Children about Divorce

There are four significant concepts that parents need to make sure they address with their children:

1. It is **not the children's fault**. There is nothing they could have done to prevent this & it's not their job to fix it
2. You still **love** them and will **always be there** for them
3. Provide them with **clarity** and **specific information** on how things will be going forward
4. Provide them with as much **stability** and **consistency** as possible

Research shows that it is not divorce that traumatizes children, it is the conflict between their parents that does

- You have the power to help your children through this and to allow them to grow up healthy

Practicalities of telling your children:

1. Both parents need to be there and both need to speak – your children need to see you acting as a team
 - Your children need you to be strong & communicate in a caring manner with them and the other parent
2. Timing – children need time to process this, so it's best to do it over a weekend. Avoid talking before bedtime
3. Anticipate what your children may ask and come up with potential responses together
4. Be aware of your non-verbal communication – don't let your anger/hurt interfere with focusing on them

The "Talk":

1. Keep the language constructive and positive (at least neutral) without blaming or finger-pointing.
 - a. Don't get too detailed about why the marriage is ending. Whatever thoughts either party has about who "caused" the divorce are issues for adults to discuss and not for children to hear
 - b. Let the children know that this is not their fault and that they had nothing to do with this happening. "Sometimes grown-ups want different things and grow apart, but nothing you did has anything to do with our decision – this is a grown-up thing."
 - c. Speak to them on their level. Ask them if they have questions – or possibly ask them what they know about divorce (often times from friend's families). Possibly use age-appropriate books.
2. Emphasize that while the marriage relationship is ending, that your individual parenting relationship with each of them will never end. Let them know that you will always be their mommy/daddy no matter what and that you will continue to see them a lot and do certain activities together. "I will always love you!"
3. Explain to them in detail what the new living and school arrangements will be
 - a. If you have a parenting plan, go through it with them and explain when they will be where
 - b. Tell them you will set-up a calendar at each house showing where they are on certain days
4. Don't assume that the children know certain things
 - a. From the emotional, such as your continued love for them, to the practical, such as what a divorce or separation means, children need both detailed explanations as well as reassurance
5. Empathize with them– don't try to pretend that everything is rosy, but tell them that it will be ok
 - a. Allow them their feelings and help reassure them – "It seems like you're feeling _____. I know that this isn't easy, but your mom/dad and I will be here to help you out."

After the "Talk":

1. Follow-up and prompt them to open up – this isn't a one-time conversation; as a parent you will need to initiate follow-up conversations to see how they are doing and allow them to ask questions.
2. Focus on consistency and stability – a lot has changed in their lives so see what routines you can keep in place such as ongoing sports/activities, watching a favorite TV show together or anything else from before
3. If age appropriate, empower them by involving them in appropriate decision-making. This way, they are less likely to feel like a victim or out-of-control. "What would you like to do with our time this weekend?"