

10 Ways to Talk with Your Kids about Divorce

BY JACQUELINE SINGER

Divorcing parents need to keep two basic but important principles in mind as they talk with their children about the divorce.

- *Your explanations should be appropriate to the age, understanding, and emotional development of the child.* Answer questions as simply as possible, taking into consideration what the child already knows, and then addressing any follow-up questions.

- *Your answers should be respectful of the child's relationship with the other parent.* For the child's own well-being, he or she should have positive feelings about the other parent.

Answer the question

1 *What do I tell my children about the divorce and why it is happening?* As soon as you have made a decision to end the marriage, tell your children. Even very young children need to understand why parents are separating. Failure to tell them can lead them to distrust you.

If possible, both parents together should talk with the children. Gear explanations to the children's ages and development. Describe the basic reasons for the divorce. Remember,

however, that some information is for adults only and children do not need to know every detail. Emphasize that the divorce is not the children's fault and that although you no longer love each other as parents, you both still love them.

2 *How do I convince my children that the divorce is not their fault?* Tell your children repeatedly that the divorce is not their fault. Don't wait for them to ask. Tell them that you love them and never imply that they were even partially responsible for the divorce, even if their difficulties may have been a source of stress during the marriage. If after reassurance your children continue to express worries and concerns, consult a mental health professional.

3 *How should I approach Dad's (or Mom's) moving out?* If possible, tell the children about a change in living arrangements before one parent moves out of the family home so that they have some time to adjust to the new situation. Take the children to visit Mom's or Dad's new home.



4 *How do I prepare my children for the custody arrangement?* Children deal best with concrete information. If they live with you, post a schedule indicating when they will be at the other parent's house, along with other important information about their activities. Give your children time to adjust to the schedule and discuss any changes before they occur. Allow your children to contact the other parent or you by phone at any time.

5 *How do I create stability and predictability in my children's lives?* One of the most important things you can do for your children is to help them maintain a routine. Rules, chores, and limits on their behavior all give them a sense of consistency "before" and "after" the divorce. Schedule regular time with each child and help each child stay involved in extracurricular activities.

Help your children feel comfortable at both parents' homes by having some of their belongings at each house. If at all possible, do not move during the first year following the separation. If you must move, maintain continuity with the children's school and friends. Let significant others know of the changes (teachers, child-care providers) so that they can be a source of support and/or information about changes in your children's behavior.

6 *How do I instill in the children love and respect for the other parent and normalize their relationship with both parents? Is this my job?* Yes, this is your job. Though you need not be a cheerleader for the other parent, help your children maintain a relationship with him or her. Do not talk negatively about the other parent. Let your children know that it is all right for them to love both of you. Don't compare your children with your ex-spouse in a negative way. Point out the positive attributes of the other parent when possible. (Say, for example, "Maybe you could ask your dad to help you with that project. He's really good at building things.")

Don't blame your children's difficulties on the other parent. Show respect for the other parent; don't undermine the children's relationship with the other parent; and if you have a complaint, deal directly with the other parent when the children are not present. Remember,

when you attack the other parent, the children also feel attacked.

Don't schedule important family activities while your children are with the other parent. When there are differences or disagreements, keep communication with the other parent child-focused.

7 *How do I tell my children to call me if they are frightened, in danger, or in any way feel it necessary, without intruding on the other parent?* Explain to your children that you and the other parent may feel differently about their calling you. Ask the children to talk with the other parent if they feel frightened or in danger. If the children cannot do this, tell them that it is all right to call you. If this causes problems, talk with the other parent about it. If talking is not constructive, seek the help of a third party (a therapist or mediator) to help you communicate better about the children's experiences. If the children could be in danger (due to a threat of violence or abuse), seek guidance from your attorney or law enforcement.

8 *How do I explain financial problems caused by the divorce?* Explain to your children, in language that they can understand, that it is more costly to support two homes than one. Without blaming the other parent, let the children know that there will have to be some changes. Get their input, if appropriate, about some of the changes you might make. (Say, for example, "We can't afford both ballet and piano lessons. Which would you rather take?")

Let your children know that you are working on a solution to your financial problems and that these difficulties should not worry them.

9 *What do I tell my children about our moving to a new home and their attending a new school and making new*

friends? Be honest and matter of fact. Don't blame the other parent, and let your children know of your specific plans as soon as you know them. If at all possible, don't move within the first year after the divorce.

If you must move, keep your children in the same school for the remainder of the academic year. Make plans for your children to see the new neighborhood and school before the move and visit their old neighborhood and friends after the move.

10 *What do I tell my children about my dating or the child's relationship with the other parent's "friend"?* Children are likely to have mixed reactions to their parents' dating. For your children, dating represents the finality of the divorce. Talk with them about it. Let them know it is all right for you to date. Explain that you will not stop loving them, and that dating does not mean you will remarry soon.

In the beginning, do not expose your children to your dates. Your children will likely view a new relationship as competition for your love and attention.

Meet your dates away from home or date when your children are with the other parent. Children become attached to the people you date, and a breakup can be difficult for them.

After you begin dating, continue to spend time alone with your children. When a serious relationship develops, invite the new person in your life to spend time alone with your children. Allow that person's relationship with the kids to develop at a pace that is comfortable for your children. ■

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