

How to Talk to Your Kids About Your Divorce

One of your biggest concerns about getting a divorce is how it will affect your children. You've likely read scary things about the impact of divorce on children, but many experts believe that having two happy parents in separate homes is much better for your kids than two parents living in conflict in one home.

There's actually a lot you can do to help your kids with the transition in your family, and it starts with how you communicate with them about the divorce.

Be Honest

The most important thing to keep in mind is that honesty is key. Do not lie to your children. It's difficult to rebuild trust if you do. Don't tell them their lives won't change or that what's happening does not affect them. You do not have to be doom and gloom, but you shouldn't promise them things that aren't true or possible.

If you don't know the answers to questions they ask you, be honest about that, but let them know you are working on getting answers.

Be Calm

You don't have to feel calm, but presenting a calm demeanor to your kids will help them feel calmer. Divorce is emotional, and it's normal to be sad, angry, and hurt. You can't change the way you feel. It's ok for your kids to see that you have emotions about this, but you should be able to be in a place where you can speak calmly and gently to them without raising your voice, crying hysterically, or being out of control.

Talk to Them Together

If at all possible, you and your spouse should talk to your kids together, and you should rehearse what you're going to say in advance. Presenting a united front is very important because it shows them you will continue to be a parental unit.

If you are separating and haven't decided whether to get a divorce, tell them that. However, if you have decided to get a divorce, using the word "divorce" and explaining what it means is very helpful.

Be calm and straightforward. Say something like, "Mom and I are going to get a divorce. This means we are going to live in separate houses and we won't be married anymore. But we will all always be a family. We will always be your parents, and we will both always love you."

Give them specifics about what is happening. Just saying you are getting a divorce is too vague a concept for most kids. Explain if anyone is moving and when they will be with each parent.

After you have explained things, ask them if they have any questions. Answer them honestly and in an age-appropriate way (see guidelines above!). Then tell them that they are going to have more questions as time goes on, and they should always come to you and ask them, and you will be honest with them. Usually, children take in the information and come up with more questions days or weeks later, particularly as changes start to happen.

Give Them Age-Appropriate Information

What a three-year-old needs to know about your divorce and what a thirteen-year-old needs to know is vastly different.

Give them only the information they need, explained in a way that makes sense to them. Preschoolers need only to know that one parent is going to live in one house and the other in another and that they have days they spend at each house. Teens, however, need to understand you're getting divorced, when it's happening, and exactly how it impacts them.

Kids may want to know why you are getting a divorce. They do not need to know the details about the hurt and the anger and the grief and the abandonment you might feel. They do not need to know if there has been an affair. They just need to know that you have decided you are not happy being married anymore. That is honest and appropriate for all ages.

Teens likely already have their own insight into what has been happening in the marriage, and denying things won't help if they ask you about them. So again, be honest, but keep in mind they are not adults, and they do not need to know everything that has happened.

Do Not Denigrate the Other Parent

It can be hard to do, but it's best for your children if you do not say bad things about the other parent to them.

You know that telling your children you are divorcing will hurt them, and it can be tempting to blame the other parent. However, this will not help your children; it will simply damage their relationship with the other parent.

It is going to be hard to keep your opinions and your reactions to yourself when you talk to your kids and in the months that follow. But when you think about the pain that you feel, remind yourself that you don't want your child to feel the same pain. If you need to vent, do so with your friends and family, not with your kids.

Your child needs both of you and loves both of you. Support your child by supporting their relationship with the other parent.

Understand Children Are Self-Centered

What your kids care about the most is how the divorce is going to affect them on a daily basis. When you tell them about the divorce, be prepared to present them with a plan for what's going to happen when. It's ok if it's a temporary plan, But you need a plan.

Telling your kids, "We're getting a divorce," and that's all will cause them to make up scenarios in their minds about what will happen. Don't let them sink into that kind of anxiety.

Tell them where everyone will live, where they will go to school, and what their week will look like. They want to know exactly what is going to happen to THEM.

If you are going to have a custody battle and don't know what the outcome is going to be, then tell them the court is going to make some decisions for everyone, but for now, this is where you're going to live.

Reassure them that both parents still love them, that they are important, and that the divorce is not their fault. Many children will automatically assume they did something to cause this, so it is important to specifically tell them it is not their fault and there is nothing they did to cause it and nothing they could have done to prevent it.

Make a Plan for Support

Everyone in a divorcing family needs support, and that includes your children. Build a support network for them:

- Read to them or give them access to age-appropriate books and videos about divorce.
- Let their teacher or guidance counselor know about the divorce so that there is support at school. Some schools have special peer support groups for kids dealing with divorce.
- If possible, find a therapist for your child. Regular therapy gives them a place to process their emotions and learn tools to cope with them.

Talking to your children about divorce can be hard, but is important. In this conversation, you will set the tone for them and let them know what to expect. This is the first of many talks you're going to have with your kids about this, so expect it to be just the first of many conversations.

Above all, remember that by doing what is right for you with your marriage, you are creating a home environment that is safe, healthy, supportive, and nurturing for your children, and this will benefit them immensely.