

Explaining Divorce to Children

Informing your children that you and your spouse are divorcing is not easy, nor should it be. But you can alleviate some of the pain and the pressure if you stick to a game plan based on simplicity, truth and emotional comfort.

Before you break the news...

Pick a time and place that is safe and that does not involve friends or relatives. Avoid conflict with important dates or deadlines i.e., child's birthday or right before a big test. Inform their teacher and school counselor so they can be watchful and supportive at school.

1. Act Like a Team

It is recommended that you sit down and tell kids together. Your kids would feel more secure and less anxious if you set clear and mutually agreed upon expectations and boundaries and send clear and similar messages about your divorce and its subsequent transitions. Even if only one parent does the talking, it's important to show a united front and that you both emphasize that your love for your kids hasn't changed one bit.

2. Plan the Discussion

Before you sit down, prep for how you will tell the kids (together), and anticipate how you'll answer some of their difficult questions.

3. Stick to the Basics

If your marriage is ending, experts recommend telling your kids simple facts. You can explain to them that their parents won't be living together anymore, but both still love their children. Talk calmly and try to keep an anger-free tone of voice.

4. Don't Blame

Regardless of what happened and why, simplicity is important when first breaking the news -- even if it's not the whole truth. Avoid giving your children sordid details about the reason for a split, like infidelity, mental health problems or alcohol or drug abuse. Parents should choose their words carefully and use neutral, blame-free language, both experts say.

a. Possible Language Suggested:

"Your mom and I have decided that we don't love each other the same as we did when you were born and now we're going to live in separate homes."

- The key is to focus on the change that's going on and the important thing to underscore is that it's not the child's fault, a transition is happening and that their emotional needs will be focused on. Their safety and happiness and the fact they feel loved is a priority.

- b. If your kids ask why, parents can add: "Sometimes adults become unhappy with how they're living their lives and decide they want to live a different way."

5. **Be Age Appropriate**

A 6-year-old is likely to accept your explanation without asking for a detailed reason. If a 10-to-12-year-old asks why, provide a true, but non-blaming reason. If a mother found another partner, she could say: "I have to move on and do different things with my life." It's not necessary to be so blunt as to say: "I've found another person." Teenagers may have figured out the reason for a split or asked for an explanation. Older kids can handle the sometimes-ugly truth, but parents should still take care to "avoid exaggerating the negative aspects of how a spouse has behaved."

6. **The kids didn't cause this. Make sure they know that.** Your best bet is to give the kids the reason for the separation but make it external to both of you and something that they can live with. "We grew apart" is a good one. "Your mom/dad is a great mom/dad but we just don't get along as a couple" is good as well. The reality (in your mind) and what you actually tell the kids, really do not have to match. It's not their fault, it's an external reason that is not the fault of any of you: you, your spouse or your kids. And for their own well-being, that's all they need to know.

7. **Say It's Okay to be Sad**

Parents should let kids know they're there to answer questions, and that it's all right if they're feeling blue. Tell kids: "We're all feeling sad about this transition, but sometimes difficult decisions need to be made in order to do what's best for family life."

8. **Focus on What Stays the Same**

No matter how old the child is, reinforce how things will be staying normal. A child who is 10 or 11 can understand an explanation like "we're not going to be married, but we're still your parents and we love you."

9. **Stress the Love**

The reason for the conversation is to let your children know what's happening, and to stress that they will still be loved.

"We both love you and that's going to continue, things may look different, but we'll all get through this."

10. **Give Two Weeks' Notice**

Once plans are made for separate homes, kids should be given about two weeks' notice to process the information. And be sure to explain to your children how each parent will be involved in their life.

11. Use Small Doses

It may be best to talk to your children several times. Three 10-minute conversations are more effective than one half-hour talk. Once a split happens, there will be constant conversations as children move back and forth between their homes.

12. Allow for Questions

Allow your kids to speak freely and ask any and all questions they may have. It is ok to say, "I don't know right now but I will let you know as soon as we know that answer."

Some common questions:

- Will we be moving?
- When will I see mom/dad again?
- Where will we live?
- Will I have to go to a different school?

Consistency is key -- to the best of your ability. Be as specific as you can in telling your kids what they should expect in the future as far as school and living arrangements. Give them concrete information and stick to it. Do not make promises that you cannot keep. Knowing what to expect and then seeing that it actually happens, will alleviate a lot of their anxieties.