

## **We've Decided to Get Divorced: How Do We Tell the Kids?**

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You've made the tough decision—perhaps one of the hardest you've ever had to make. It was agonizing, and perhaps a long time coming, but the two of you believe that this is the best choice for your family. But now, how do you tell the children? Telling your children about an upcoming or pending divorce is perhaps the most painful conversation that you will ever have with them. Truly, the only conversation that would be more difficult would be to tell them that one of the parents had died. For most children this is a 9/11 moment: they will remember the when and the where forever. They will remember the big details and the small ones. And they will remember the words that you used.

Therefore, before you can even think about what to say, it is important to consider the timing of this information, which is often one of the parameters overlooked in the emotion of the decision. As a parent, it is extremely important to see this experience from your child's perspective. Once the actual decision is finally made, you are often driven by anxiety to tell your child as quickly as possible; as much to inform them as to escape your own feelings of stress and tension that build as time goes on and you feel like you are "keeping a secret". What you need to understand is that hearing the news about parental divorce is often traumatic for most children, and typically unexpected. That is why it is so important that you recognize not only

the impact of this news on your child but why the timing matters. Where they are, when it occurs, and what is going on at the time are all variables imprinted on your child's memory and subsequent recall of this experience. It is therefore critical that you NOT tell your child about a pending divorce around a "recurring anniversary" event that will get triggered every year such as holidays, birthdays, beginning and ending of school/summer or other significant events. You remember 9-11 EVERY year on September 11<sup>th</sup>, and even unconsciously relive the trauma that hearing about the Twin Towers crash caused you. Similarly, if you contaminate a significant event with this news of divorce, each time that event recurs, potentially for the rest of their lives, they will recall "oh yeah, THIS is when you told me about the divorce" (and my life changed forever) and re-experience, even briefly, a pang of grief and sadness that accompanied the original news, never really allowing that wound to fully heal. At times, of course, it is simply not possible to do the "ideal" and in that instance I encourage you to seek further guidance on how to best structure the timing to mitigate some of the potential fall out. Parents in the throes of a divorce are often not thinking clearly, but the goal for the sake of your children, is to share this painful news in not only the best possible way, but at the best possible time.

Once you've decided on the general timing, it makes the most sense to have this talk with your children over the weekend, preferably on a Saturday morning or early afternoon, although sometimes you do have to plan around your children's busy activity schedule. Children should be told at home, using the kitchen, den, living room or game room but not their bedrooms. I like to recommend that parents bring

in donuts or pastries, or lunch treats if it's later in the day, as this serves as both a distraction and lays the groundwork for the children that "something is up". It is extremely important to remember that this conversation is the first of many, and is simply providing the foundation for having future talks as they process the information and life moves on. Consequently, depending on the age of the children and the number of questions asked, this initial talk should take no more than 10-15 minutes, especially since they will not remember very much after you say "We are getting divorced".

Children demonstrate a wide variety of emotional and behavioral responses to the news ranging from shock and anger and tantrums to sadness and tears to no reaction at all, as if "it's no big deal" or they knew it was coming and were therefore more prepared. There is no response that is "wrong" or "abnormal" unless it is at such an intense level that you are worried about your child's safety. In the hundreds of families with whom I've structured and scripted this talk, the most extreme reaction I've heard is when a child ran out of the house and up into a tree (which they were also prepared to deal with). On the flip side, you must also be prepared for your own emotional responses. It is okay to be sad and it is okay to cry. It is also okay not to cry if that is not your usual reaction to such situations. By showing your own emotion, in the way that you typically do, it lets your children know that this is hard and it gives them permission for their own feelings. It would benefit both of you to think about how your children might react, and how likely they are to either be "shocked" or to have some idea that this was coming.

So, you've scheduled the talk and you've set the stage. You've readied yourself for your children's reaction as well as your own. Now what? What do you actually say? How do you actually start? It is very important that both parents actively participate in this discussion and to start you can simply ask your children to come into the kitchen as you have something important to discuss with them. At this point, depending on your family circumstances, one of your children might ask: "are you getting divorced?" If this happens, quite frankly, your child is giving you a gift (and telling you not only that they "know" but are more prepared to hear this news than you likely anticipated) and you accept it by simply saying, "yes, and that is what we want to discuss with you". If not, then after everyone is settled in, with their donuts or pastries, one of you can introduce the discussion, by stating "we have made the very difficult decision to get divorced". The pronoun that you use, such as "we", which is preferred, is a personal decision depending on your personal circumstances. To the degree, however, that you can present this as a joint decision, it creates a unified front for your children and neither parent should be held unduly responsible. Regardless of the pronoun, at that point, it is important, especially with very young children, to follow this statement with "what this means, is that we are not going to be married to each other any more" or "we are not going to be a husband and wife anymore". I encourage you, when discussing marriage or divorce, to focus on using "husband/wife" language, but when you reference the parent/child relationship, you focus on using "mom/dad" language. The distinction, while subtle, is significant and draws a line between the marital relationship and the

parenting relationship. It is also important that you use “divorce” rather than euphemisms that often muddy the picture and confuse the children. Once you’ve crossed the initial hurdle, there are several “must tell” messages that need to occur in the next 10 to 15 minutes (and as often as you can thereafter in future discussions). There is no special order to them, and I encourage you to say the same things in different ways for the message to sink in:

- 1) We will always love you and nothing can change that
- 2) We will always be your parents (mom will always be your mom, dad will always be your dad) and we will always be a family, just a different kind of family
- 3) This is not your fault and this has nothing to do with you (you did not cause this and you cannot fix this)
- 4) This is a grown-up decision and not something that you can change (this is a final decision)
- 5) Some things will change moving forward, and some things won’t (be prepared to provide examples of both: “you will have two homes” “you will continue to play baseball and soccer”)
- 6) This is for the best, even if it doesn’t feel that way, and we will all be okay
- 7) We will always be a family, just a different kind of family

After the initial shock wears off, the remaining discussion becomes very child-centric. Your children will want to know “how does this affect ME?” They will often, but not always, have questions that I encourage you to answer to the degree that

you can. Do not be afraid, however, to say “I don’t know” but follow that with, “ as soon as we do, we will tell you”. Do not make assertions that you are unsure of (e.g., you will continue to live in the same house) or promises you may be unable to keep (e.g., you will continue to attend private school through graduation). A sample of the most typical questions include:

- 1) Why?
- 2) Whose decision was this?
- 3) Where will we live?
- 4) Will we stay in the house?
- 5) Will we go to the same school/church?
- 6) Will I still be able to play.... Or do.....?
- 7) Who else knows? Can I tell my friends?
- 8) Do you still love mom? Do you still love dad?

Answering these questions are beyond the scope of this article, but if you think you will need guidance on how to respond to these kind of queries I encourage you to seek assistance from a local professional who can help you customize your script to your unique family circumstances.

Finally, what do you do after? Some families benefit from going for a family hike or to the local park. Others go to a movie or out for a snack. Other families just spend some time at home, either all together or alone as they process the emotional cataclysm this news creates. It is important that both parents remain available to

your children in the days following so that your actions follow your words. It is also helpful to check in periodically on how your children are doing, or to answer any questions, taking the opportunity to deliver the “must tell” messages in a unified manner. There are many books available for young children that may be useful during the weeks that follow this talk as a way to reinforce the same messages. As hard as this discussion may be, you will survive and so will your children and you will all be better off for the time and effort you have taken to prepare and to tell them this news in the best possible way. Good luck.