

Telling Children About Divorce

A healthy approach to difficult conversations



RHODE ISLAND DIVORCE MEDIATION CENTER





Telling children about a divorce can be one of the most difficult conversations for parents to have. No one can predict how children will react to hearing about their parents' divorce, but what children are told and how they are told greatly impacts their reactions, their ability to process the information, and their emotional safety and security.

We know children are resilient, but their ability to process and ultimately adjust to divorce depends on their parents and their environments. Divorcing parents have a responsibility to ensure that fear and uncertainty never become their child's dominant emotions.

One component of the human thought process and our survival instinct is that in the absence of information, we liken the outcome of our situation to an outcome we have seen for others in situations similar to our own. Children are no different, but, unlike adults, they do not possess the ability to rationalize their way through their fears. In the case of divorce, children look to their parents for stability and reassurance through both words and actions.

Minimizing trauma and helping children transition through a divorce requires a supportive, cooperative effort from parents and close extended family. Personal feelings, grievances and inappropriate details about the divorce should never be shared with children regardless of their age. The goal is to reassure children they are loved, safe, and will always have both parents in their lives.

Prior to telling children about a divorce, parents should understand the child grieving process so they know what to expect and how to properly support their child through it. Parents who have moderate to high conflict relationships should always consult with a mental health professional prior to telling their children for guidance on the best way to tell them and manage parental conflict.

It is important to note that even children who are not exposed to conflict may need professional help to manage powerful emotions and family transitions.

This information is not a substitute for mental health guidance or advice.

Only Provide Relevant, Age Appropriate Information

There is a lot of information parents need to share with their children when they break the news about a divorce, but there are some topics that are off limits and should never be part of the conversation. Regardless of how old children are, financial details or either parent's personal feelings that could make the other parent look bad or to blame for the divorce are never appropriate. Any information that may cause children to side with one parent, is confusing, or ambiguous should also be avoided.

What is most important for children of any age is knowing everyone's future living arrangements, how their time will be spent with each parent and what parts of their lives will not change. Older children will also be concerned about maintaining their friends and social activities, whether they will have to change schools, and their ability to attend college.



Mediator tip...

Parents with moderate to high conflict relationships should work with a mental health professional specializing in children, grief & loss who can help determine the most appropriate information to share with their children and the proper setting to tell the child about the divorce. Counselors can also guide one or both parents on how to handle tough questions their children may ask, how to respond when children convey inappropriate information they have been told by their other parent, and manage negative influences from extended family.

Moderate to high conflict environments and parental relationships have a powerful impact on a child's emotional safety and security, and are responsible for many of the developmental and social challenges children experience. The effects of conflict and parental adversity do not fade with time and often impact children well into adulthood.

Avoid Telling Children Prematurely

Prior to telling children about a divorce there are a few basic decisions parents should have already made: where each of them and their child will be living, a time-sharing schedule, and how much of their child's daily life will remain the same. These are typical questions children ask, but if parents cannot adequately address these concerns, it diminishes their child's sense of security, can provoke anxiety, lead to depression, and cause adverse behavioral changes.

Safety and security are the foundation of healthy child development and children derive these core needs from their parents and home environment. During a divorce, children often require on-going reassurance that their needs will be met.



Mediator tip...

Parenting Plans are the first thing I work on with my clients to establish their parenting schedule, the roles and responsibilities each of them will take on during and after the divorce, and what needs their children have that must be met. With these decisions in place, parents are able to provide their children with a solid plan of what they can expect. The goal is to reinforce the child's security and minimize inconsistency that can overwhelm or confuse them. If parents are already living apart and children know or surmise that a divorce is coming, it is important for parents to sit down together with their children and provide them with the schedule they will all follow and what their day-to-day life will be like with each parent. This is an important part of re-balancing a child's sense of security and connectedness with both parents.

Parents should try to have their parenting plan in place and tell their children about the divorce as soon as possible to avoid having their children hear about it from someone else.

Be Honest

Even the most well prepared parents can be presented with questions from their children they don't have answers for. When this happens, give your child credit for asking a great question, let him or her know you are working on that particular issue, and as soon as you both have made a decision, you will let them know. Giving children an arbitrary answer on the spot may satisfy them in the moment, but if it is not the decision you and your spouse eventually make, it can erode the child's trust and reinforce fear.



Mediator tip...

If children have been exposed to conflict or overheard arguments, the questions they ask can be more pointed, and more difficult to answer in a way that is both appropriate and does not disparage their other parent. Working with a counselor specializing in children, grief and loss prior to telling children about a divorce can help parents manage the information they provide and respond to their children appropriately based on their age, maturity and personality. The goal is always to maintain the child's emotional safety and security.

Don't Hide Your Sadness

Divorcing parents may want to shield their children from the effects of divorce, but they should not hide their sadness from their children. Parents who are open about their sadness teach their children that grieving is a part of life and not something to hide or be ashamed of. The open expression of grief promotes empathy; an important part of healing and feeling supported by those we love.

Every child feels and expresses grief differently. Gender, age, family dynamics, beliefs and even birth order contribute to how we grieve. But what is consistent across all these variables is the feeling of loss, sadness and fear that children must be encouraged to express. Parents are powerful examples for their children, especially during a divorce.



Mediator tip...

For some children, the news that their parents are getting divorced can be just the beginning of the loss they will feel. Children who end up moving from family homes, changing schools and losing the day-to-day contact they had with their peers, or are alienated from either parent experience cumulative losses that can be overwhelming and difficult for them to manage. Encourage your child to be open about their feelings and incorporate a counselor specializing in children, grief and loss to help your child cope when necessary.

final thoughts...

Give your children the time and space they need to grieve the loss in their own way. Let them know you are there for them and available to talk whenever they need to. Recognize signs of when your child may need professional help and keep the well-being of your child a priority no matter how bumpy things get.