

KEY ELEMENTS FOR FAMILY & DIVORCE STORY: Bridging Children from the Past to the Future

Children need a clear, cohesive, blame-free story that lets them know that they came into this world in a context of love, and that love remains, even while the marriage does not. Kids need to know that their parents' love for them persists, even while the marriage does not. Remember, how your child sees you treat the parent of the same sex as the child's gender is often how your child will expect to be treated by his/her future partner. Allow the story to value each parent's strengths, and to free the kids from being obligated to sign up for one or the other parent's blame. When one parent feels grossly mistreated, it is *not* always easy to generate a blame-free, shared-responsibility divorce story. What we know is that children who have been involved in blaming one parent out of loyalty to another parent, usually "wake up" later feeling used by the blaming parent. Seek the help of a licensed mental health professional (co-parenting specialist) to help you co-parent in ways that keep your children out of the stress and turmoil they feel when they are caught in the middle. The clarity of this family-divorce story helps relieve kids of the anxiety they feel when nothing is explained clearly, and the story offers an opportunity for the kids to respond, ask questions and have their own feelings about the divorce/separation with both parents supporting them. This in turn offers hope for a future where both parents care and consider the children's needs. Often it is ideal to have a therapist present who can help support the children's full self-expression with the parents, while supporting the parents' ability to stay on track without provoking one another. Many divorcing parents hire therapists specializing in such matters to combine their disparate stories, and to help them to eliminate any judgments/blame from the content.

- 1. Talk at age appropriate level for your children. Use "I-statements."**
- 2. Start with how we met. Recount fun, loving experiences shared.**
- 3. Recount how we were two separate people, with separate interests who came together out of love and respect. Share when/how we decided to join our lives and why.**
- 4. Share what we liked/loved about each other and what we still appreciate about each other.**
- 5. Explain why we asked people to help with the marriage ceremony (if we had one) plans or plans to join our lives – the different tasks and needed specialists when we came together as a couple.**
- 6. Share our excitement about having a baby – you, *our* child. Do this for each child.**
- 7. Talk about the love we experienced or had then as a family (if we did), and how we will always love/appreciate the other for giving each other such wonderful children.**
- 8. Dialogue about how shared family experiences (IF parents lived together) were valuable to all of us, and how we will always remember them fondly.**
- 9. (Make this specific to your family) Talk in a neutral, nonjudgmental and blame-free way about what things started to change between us (parents) that left us unhappy. Talk about our *shared responsibility in this* – e.g. assuming things without talking with each other, having difficulties and ignoring them, judging instead of understanding the other's perspective, having different ideas about things and not knowing how to talk about these or bridge our differences.**
- 10. We tried to get help from professionals who teach people how to communicate better (if this was true). Even with help we weren't able to work things out in a way**

that worked for both of us. So, we decided to separate and live apart. This is called separating or getting a divorce.

11. We are not separating from or divorcing you!! We will both *a/ways* love you and we'll always be your parents.
12. We have asked people to help us separate/divorce/co-parent because there are so many things to do, just as when we joined our lives. We want to make sure experts help all of us to do this kindly and respectfully.
13. You may have big and hard feelings, and sometimes we will have difficult feelings too. Changes like this can be hard for all of us. (Validate your child's sense of loss or grief, when it occurs.) Minimizing and/or catastrophizing will leave your child feeling alone and possibly overwhelmed.
14. You (the child) will have a coach (child specialist in a collaborative divorce) too, so you can talk about how you feel and what you think without worrying about us – that's *not* your job. We will still be co-parenting together, and talking/sharing about your needs/worries and how to support you.
15. You can ask us any questions at any time. We will let you know about changes that are happening as soon as we know.
16. Come up with a blame-free 2-3 sentence story that you can share with your kids, friends and family to keep your restructured family embedded in your extended community of family and friends. Run your stories by your divorce coach-therapist who can help you combine both your views in a blame-free way. Consider that this short narrative is creating the context that will help everyone to move forward respectfully, while honoring what was.