

TELLING YOUR CHILDREN YOU WILL BE DIVORCING

When parents have reached a clear decision to tell their child(ren) they are getting separated or divorced, Dr. Bingham Newman offers this candid advice: “You have to keep that communication door open . . . communicate with kids! And if you haven’t been, then you’d better start.”

They will have been feeling the tension between you. Stay respectful and civil, even with your nonverbal language, in front of the children. Children of divorce do better depending on the degree they’re shielded from your conflict or negative feelings and reactions to one another.

A list of tips adapted from Dr. Newman’s suggestions for divorcing parents to help them deliver the news to children:

1. Consider putting your children in therapy with a therapist specializing in divorce matters “as part of their education,” for at least a month before you tell them you’re divorcing. This allows them to already have a connection with the therapist, before they get the news.
2. Write and agree upon a joint Mission Statement for how you will approach the divorce/custody (see attached guidelines).
3. Give a simple reason for the divorce, without “adult” details. (See attached guidelines for writing a blame-free, nonjudgmental Short Divorce Story that will be “the party line” for children and their extended communities).
4. Make sure all family members are present, including both parents and very young children.
5. Plan ahead for *exactly* when and what you are going to say. Be honest and straightforward, without sharing adult details. Include your combined Mission Statement, and Short Divorce Story.
6. Identify a time when the kids’ will have plenty of free time afterwards, to feel whatever they feel, without major obligations or distractions. After a couple of hours, consider going out as a family to a lunch and a light-hearted movie or similar activity, so they have a sense things can continue to be relatively “normal,” civil and respectful.
7. Don’t assess blame. Avoid all negative judgments, and say explicit, positive things about your co-parent. Remember that half your child(ren)’s DNA (or if adopted, half their life experience and modeling) is sourced from your co-parent. When you criticize your co-parent, you criticize your child(ren).
8. Emphasize that your children did not cause the divorce, and that there is nothing they could have done or do to make the decision turn out differently. It’s an adult decision, that affects them – that’s on both of you, but *they* didn’t cause it.
9. Emphasize that both parents will continue to love and care for the child(ren).
10. Emphasize that your child(ren) are still part of a family – it’s just “restructured.”
11. Describe things you know will stay the same. Children need as much stability and predictability as possible to feel safe. Don’t promise what you can’t.
12. Describe changes that will occur. When there are changes you don’t know about yet, let them know you will tell them, together, ahead of time, as soon as you know when/which changes will occur.
13. If your child(ren) are older, outline the steps you have taken to save the marriage, so they know this decision has been made with thoughtful and considerable effort to do otherwise.
14. Acknowledge your children’s feelings. Keep reflecting these. They will come in cycles and waves.
15. Encourage questions. But not about details of your relationship (“That’s really a grown-up issue between us.”)
16. Expect to repeat the information on more than one occasion. Keep reassuring them of your own and your co-parent’s love and availability. Review “Groundrules for Co-parenting” handouts.