



Telling Your Kids You're Getting a Divorce

Divorce is a sad and life-changing situation. But with more than half of all marriages ending in divorce, it's a reality many kids must face. What's the best way to tell your children you are getting a divorce?

Decide when to tell the kids

There will never be a good time to give a child unsettling news. It will always be close in time to a holiday, a birthday, the start/end of a school year, etc. And holding out on the news won't make it less painful. Once you have made a decision about your post-separation plans (for example, where the children will be living), talk to your kids.

Practice what you're going to say

It's natural that you're going to be nervous, especially since you need to tell them something unpleasant. You don't want to feel that you too are hearing these words for the first time when you speak them. Practice the key points that you want to cover, and if needed, write them down.

Tell them together

You may not have worked well as a team in marriage, but make every effort to share this news with them together so that you aren't giving them conflicting information. You want them to know that you are both there for them to answer questions and support them through this difficult time.

You set the tone

It's incredibly difficult to maintain composure when you are talking about a life altering situation. But if you can remain as calm as possible, your children can mirror your reaction. It will also help assure them that they will be okay (even if you feel that you are still trying to convince yourself of that).

Don't tell them more than they need to know

Keep information regarding the causes for your divorce from the kids. That is adult information. All kids want to know is what is going to happen regarding their lives (e.g., day-care, school, friends, activities, special times with parents, their room, and possessions).

Don't point fingers at each other

Although during times of frustration you may be tempted, don't blame each other or try to pit the kids against the other parent. Don't frame it as one parent is divorcing the other. Rather, discuss this as being a shared decision. You might even liken it to their own play circles. Ask if they've ever had a friend that they don't play with as much simply because they now like different things.

Tell your child's specialists about the divorce

Tell the people that support your child about this major life change. They will most likely be seeing a change in your child's behavior, and they will only best be able to help your child cope if they have the relevant information. Your child's aides, therapists and other specialists may also have additional resources on divorce they can share with your family.

Make the discussion age appropriate

Try to avoid giving the kids more details than they need. Young children may not need information beyond the fact that you and your spouse will be living in different houses. Older children may ask for more details, but keep in mind that what they really may be fishing for is confirmation that they are not the source of the divorce. Regardless of the age, they don't need to know all of the trials that brought you to divorce. And above all, for every age child, emphasize and re-emphasize that a divorce will not change your love for your children.

Answer your children's questions

Be honest when you address your child's concerns. If you don't know an answer, then admit that. You can help lower your child's anxiety by reducing the number of unknowns. This will also let your children know that you are there for them and leave open the communication channels so they know they can continue to talk to you as more questions arise.

Use social stories

Social stories can be used to prepare a child for a multitude of scenarios, including divorce. Here are two downloadable social stories:

Divorce Social Story for Preschool, Autism, Down Syndrome and Special Needs
<http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/divorce-social-story-social/id489580027?mt=8>

Boardmaker Share page

<http://www.boardmakershare.com/Activity/377960/social-story-my-family/#>

You can also ask your child's therapist to help you customize a social story.

Reassure them that you can't divorce your children

Children may think that divorce can happen between any two family members. They need to be reassured (perhaps over and over) that you will always be their parents and that your love for them won't change.

Allow them to react

Not everyone reacts the same way. Children with Autism may react in a way that we would deem inappropriate. For instance, a child might laugh at the news, not because they think the situation is humorous, but because they feel joy that they themselves are not the divorcing party. Allow them time to digest the information and realize that a reaction to the news may be delayed. Divorce itself may seem like an abstract idea to the child until one parent physically moves out.

Keep as much routine and structure intact as you can

We know routine and structure can be critical for our kids. Try to lessen your child's anxiety by pointing out what will stay the same. If you don't already have one, create a written schedule for your child. Predictability in knowing where they will be and what's coming next can be paramount for your child, especially in a situation where they feel they have little control.

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When to introduce new dating partners

As a general statement, many professionals recommend that new significant others should not be brought into the lives of children for at least a year.

Special thanks to Barbara Love, Ph.D. for her contributions to this article.

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Additional Resources

Dinosaurs Divorce: A Guide for Changing Families
[Available on Amazon](#)

It's Not Your Fault, Koko Bear
[Available on Amazon](#)

The Special Needs Child and Divorce: A Practical Guide to Handling and Evaluating Cases
[Available on Amazon](#)

Facing Divorce with a Special Needs Child
www.pathfindersforautism.org/docs/Facing-Divorce-with-a-Special-Needs-Child.pdf

Possibilities: A Financial Resource for Parents of Children with Disabilities Keeping the Peace / If Things Don't Work Out Between You and Your Spouse
<http://www.pacer.org/publications/possibilities/keeping-the-peace.html>

How Can We Help Our Autistic Child Cope With Our Divorce?
<http://autism.about.com/od/copingwithautism/f/divorce.htm>

Divorce and Autism - Tips for Making It Easier on Your Autistic Child
<http://voices.yahoo.com/divorce-autism-tips-making-easier-your-3189145.html>

Divorce Advice for Special Needs Families
www.tacanow.org/family-resources/divorce-advice-for-special-needs-families/

Kids Health - Divorce Articles
<http://kidshealth.org/parent/>
Search "Divorce"

Dept of Human Resources - Maryland Child Support Enforcement Program
<http://www.dhr.state.md.us/csea/index.php>