

How To Talk With Your Minor Children About Your Upcoming Separation or Dissolution of Marriage

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(To avoid the clumsiness of using “child/children”, I have intentionally used “children” throughout this article.)

The following are some tips for you as you prepare to talk with your minor children. It is clear that you care about doing the best you can for your children, because you are reading this article. Give yourself permission not to be perfect. No one is. Remember to keep taking slow, deep breaths...you and your children will get through this difficult time.

1. Agree on a time when you both can be present to talk with your children together. Siblings need the support system that they can provide each other. Divorce is a major life crisis for all family members and should be treated as such. Ideally it is best to share the news with your children when they will have adequate time to absorb what you will be telling them, for example, when they do not have to go back to school in a day or two after hearing the news.
2. Plan your presentation to your children in advance. Make some notes about what you plan to say and review them so that you are familiar with what you intend to say. Anticipate what they may say to you. You can have the notes in front of you, if you wish, and simply say, “We have made some notes because what we are going to be talking about is very important for all of us and we don’t want to forget anything.” Remember that your children will likely be in emotional shock after you tell them your intentions to end your marriage and they will not be able to absorb everything you say this first time. Be prepared to have the same conversation with them numerous times. Their shock and grieving will interfere with them being able to fully take in all that you are sharing.
3. Tell them that the two of you have decided to end your marriage and live in different homes because you have adult problems between you that you haven’t been able to resolve. Avoid using the word “divorce” because it is laden with negative connotations. Also assure your children that this is NOT THEIR fault. Children often automatically assume it is.
4. Reassure them that you love them, that you will always love them and that you will always be their parents. Avoid saying that you don’t love each other any more. Children then think that perhaps their parents could stop loving them one day as well. This would unsettle them and the stable foundation that having two loving parents provides.
5. Avoid blaming each other. This is the time for the two of you to have a united front with your children. Remember that this news will shatter their view of their family as they have known it. Blaming each other puts them in the middle of your pain and conflict, causes them to experience divided loyalty and feel that they need to choose sides, as well as feel guilt for loving both of you. Children often report that they hated being put in this position and feeling that each parent was attempting to form an alliance with them against the other parent.
6. Next, tell them what is going to remain the same. Tell them that you are all still family, that you will always be their parents and that you will always love them. Tell them that your intention is to be amicable so that you can both attend their activities and family gatherings and not create tension for them, for other family members or for their friends. Tell them if one of you intends to stay in the family home, etc. Assure them that they will be remaining in their same

schools, same activities, etc. Also assure them that they will continue to have the emotional support of both parents in the newly restructured family.

7. Next, tell them what is not going to remain the same. Tell them if you both will be moving into new homes and that they can be involved in looking at them at the appropriate time, for example, once you have narrowed your choices down to two options. It's important to be neutral and factual. Resist being a victim or martyr. It will only make them feel guilty.

8. Remember that you are still their parents. It is your job to put their feelings above yours and provide them with the support they need to hear, feel and understand what you are sharing with them. Acknowledge that you realize the announcement is a shock and that their feelings (anger, sadness, grief, shock, etc.) are normal. Focus on and be empathetic with THEIR feelings. Don't talk about your feelings, e.g., how you haven't been happy for years, how you deserve to be happy, etc. Having just received such painful news, they will be unable to express their happiness for you, and it is unreasonable for you to expect them to do so. Remember, their familial foundation has just been rocked and their family history is being rewritten. They are losing their "family nest".

9. Tell them that you still believe in family and that you hope they will too. Tell them that you don't expect them to take care of you emotionally or physically, that that is your job, not theirs.

10. Avoid telling them that you stayed together or delayed restructuring your family because of them. This will make them feel guilty for your unhappy marriage. Depending on their ages, they may already be recalling their childhood memories and wondering: "What was real and what wasn't real? Were you really happy on those family vacations?" Divorce destabilizes the family system and inevitably shakes every family member's perception of their past, their present and their future.

11. Assure them that this will be a process for all of you to move through, at your own pace and in your own way. Assure them that you will always love them and that you will always be there for them in whatever ways will be most helpful to them. You want them to know that they aren't alone so they don't become isolated and depressed. Encourage them to speak with a counselor or youth pastor about their feelings. Tell them you have spoken with or intend to speak with a counselor as well, to talk about your feelings.

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Carol R. Hughes, Ph.D., LMFT, holds her Doctorate degree in Clinical Psychology, and her Master's degree in Counseling Psychology, achieving both summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa honors. She is also a two-time Fulbright Scholar. In private practice in Laguna Hills, CA, since 1983, Dr. Hughes is a respected expert and sought-after speaker on the effects of divorce on children. She is a board-certified clinical hypnotherapist, an EMDR therapist and a former professor of Human Services at Saddleback College. In 2003 she became one of the founding members of Collaborative Divorce Solutions of Orange County, and is also a co-founder of and trainer for the Collaborative Divorce Education Institute in Orange County, CA, a non-profit organization, whose mission is to educate the public about peaceful options for divorce, as well as to provide quality training for collaborative divorce professionals. She frequently trains and mentors collaborative practitioners and has appeared on the Time Warner Public television series "How to Get a Divorce". Carol is a frequent presenter at conferences of the International Academy of Collaborative Professionals, the Association of Family Conciliation Courts, and California's annual statewide conferences for collaborative professionals. In 2011 Carol was honored with the Eureka Award, which recognizes those who have made significant contributions and demonstrated an abiding dedication to establishing and sustaining Collaborative Practice in California. For a complete listing of her collaborative practice training and teaching workshops please visit www.CollaborativePractice.com, the website of the International Academy of Collaborative Professionals, and click on the "Locate a Collaborative Professional near you" link. In addition, please visit her website at www.DivorcePeacemaking.com and www.CDEI.info.