

How to Tell the Kids



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How, what & when to tell your children that you are considering divorce & that one parent will soon move out of the marital home is a tough call. There is no one right way, but there are lots of wrong ways. Screaming at your spouse that you are moving out mid-argument is unwise. Having the children find out from a relative or friend is poor planning. Leaving & then announcing it as a fait accompli is the coward's way out.

HOW

One almost universal rule is that how & when should be a joint decision, made in a lucid moment by parents who put their kids' well being ahead of their own agendas. Discuss your approach thoroughly beforehand with a full understanding of the impact the news will carry. Telling the kids as a couple makes sense, as it prevents disparagement & may soften the blow. Naturally, what is said depends upon the age of the children.

As much as possible, put a positive spin on the announcement. All kids should be present at the discussion, regardless of age. Tailor the information to each one. Younger children need few words & lots of hugs.

Ascertain their thought process & be guided accordingly. Kids must be given the chance to ask questions, process the information themselves & then ask more questions later.

When one parent leaves, kids worry the other parent will leave too. It is crucial that kids are assured & reassured of 2 facts; that they are not losing a parent & the break up is not their fault. Parents simply cannot repeat those mantras too many times in too many different ways.

WHAT

What to tell them? It is best to explain simply that Mom & Dad no longer get along & the situation is their private business, which they will work out together. Tell the kids that divorce, support & custody are none of their concern. Unless one parent is going to live with their paramour, don't introduce that concept or the subject of adultery. Tell them life will not appreciably change for them. Business as usual. They will still see their grandparents, relatives, friends & attend the same school. Both parents will attend their spring concert & soccer banquet, take them to McDonalds and pick out sneakers.

Be specific, let them know where Dad will live, when they will see him, where they will sleep. Tell them custody will be shared & that both parents are available 24-7. No one is disappearing. Open the door to their input.

WHEN

Timing is critical. According to Richboro Family Therapist, Dr. Robert Menapace, it is a mistake to tell your children you are "thinking about divorce." Announce it instead as a done deal. Ideally, tell the children a few weeks to a month prior to the physical split to enable them time to process the information. Telling them more than a month before the move is too far in advance. If the divorce is prematurely announced, the kids will feel they need to pick sides or fix the problem.

Don't tell them what you are planning to do, "after" the house is sold or "when" Dad finds an apartment. It's too confusing.

Many couples live separate & apart in the same house. Usually, their kids know what is happening. Nonetheless, with an in house separation, couples can still camouflage their troubles. Kids can tune marital conflict in & out. But don't be surprised if their first reaction is one of sadness peppered with relief.

Post separation, it is important that each parent spends alone time with each child. Be aware if your children begin to cross generational boundaries. Keep kids in a kid's mindset. Discourage your son from taking on the man-of-the-house role. Assure him it is not his job to lock the doors at night, worry about money or be your confidant. As long as kids see both parents acting as parents, they will not jump

in to fill that void. Roles need to remain well defined. Mom acts like a Mom, Dad acts like a Dad & kids act like kids & worry only about kid stuff.

Otherwise, it's too much of a burden. Normal childhood development will be retarded. You will see your children act out, either by adopting a new perfectionism or by acting the juvenile delinquent. Their subconscious game plan is to figure out how to keep Mom & Dad together, whatever it takes.

Effective co-parenting is tough. Fake it if you have to. You will not always agree on discipline or house rules. The kids will get mixed messages especially if 2 parents focus on convincing the other they are right rather than work towards a solution to the presenting problem. Use available resources, family, friends, therapists to guide your family through this transition.

Nancy Larkin Taylor is a familiar figure in Bucks and Montgomery County where she has been practicing family law for many years.

Mrs. Taylor firmly believes that if our divorce, support and custody systems are ever going to improve, it will occur when parties and parents work together to achieve joint goals.

Those goals include striving for custodial arrangements that meet their childrens' best interests & full financial disclosure which leads to a fair and quick resolution of economic issue so that fissures created in divorce do not last a lifetime.

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