

## **Talking with Your Children about Separation and Divorce: Some Ideas and Tips to Help You Do It Right**

Dr. Joan B. Kelly

It is very important for parents to talk with their children about the separation, preferably before you physically separate or very soon thereafter. Surprisingly few parents provide an explanation of what is happening and give their children an opportunity to ask questions. Parents frequently dread this conversation because of worries about how the children will react and whether you and your partner can control your own emotions. Parents often feel guilty about hurting the children's adjustment, and may have fears that an older child or adolescent may blame or reject them. But despite your anxiety, all children need to know what's happening, and how the separation will affect their lives. Providing age-appropriate information will help your children and adolescents cope with the many changes in their lives initiated by the separation and divorce. It will make them feel less anxious. And it establishes a healthy pattern of communication with your children. Although what you say varies by age (for example, preschoolers don't understand big concepts like separation or divorce, but they do understand that mom and dad will not be living in the same house, and one of you is moving out), there are some central things that children always want to know. Expect that talking with your children about separation will be difficult. It will require your most mature adult behavior but later on, you will feel good that you made this effort for your children.

### **Here are some ideas to help you as you plan your discussion.**

1. Think about the tone of your conversation. Despite how you each feel, can you both agree to contain your anger, accusations and harsh words in front of your children? Your sadness and tears are OK.
2. Telling children about separation should NEVER be used as an opportunity to damage or destroy your children's relationship with the other parent, no matter how angry you or your partner is. This can have tragic outcomes for children.
3. Basic reassurance about continued love and caretaking after separation is important. Inappropriate details of why the divorce is happening are not.
4. If you can, work out an interim agreement about what your living arrangements will be before you talk with your children. Then when your children ask where they will live and when they will see each of you, you will have some beginning answers, although this may change later. If you have rented another residence, tell them that you want them to see it right after you separate. This helps them get a concrete picture of an important part of their future lives.
5. A great deal of divorce research tells us that the vast majority of children love each of their parents, want them involved in their lives after separation and divorce, and want opportunities to be with each of you after separation.

6. Don't rush. Allow your children time to react. Don't cut them off or tell them they will be fine. They won't be, at least at this time. Accept their anger, tears, fears, and encourage them to ask questions both now and in the future. If you don't get through everything you planned, or your children just don't want to talk any further, plan another time to talk in a few days. This conversation should be the first of many, and will help your children maintain a trusting relationship with you.

### **What Do Children and Adolescents Need and Want to Know?**

1. That you have some very important things to say. That a decision was made to separate, to live in separate homes, and that it will happen in X days or weeks. If the separation is going to lead to divorce, don't hide or sugar coat that.
2. Tell them that the decision was not caused by them and was not in any way their fault. This was an adult decision, a difficult and sad one.
3. Reassure them that a separation or divorce between mom and dad does not mean that either of you are divorcing them. You will always be their parents.
4. Tell your children what this separation means for them and what happens next. Where each of you will live, and where the children will be living (sharing in some way between homes, or with one parent more than the other). Reassure them that they will continue to see and be with both parents (unless there are serious problems of drug abuse, mental illness, child abuse, violence).
5. Children wonder if it is OK for them to continue loving each of you. You should emphasize that you really want that and don't want them to feel that they have to take sides.
6. If you are having a lot of conflict, explain that you both will work hard to stop the conflict. And that you don't want them to be in the middle (this is damaging to children's adjustment).
7. Your children and adolescents will want to know if they can still go to the same school, see their friends, and continue in their favorite sports or other activities.
8. Reassure them that you will both be here for them, and want them to feel they can ask more questions anytime. Encourage them to give you feedback if things aren't working for them. Many older children and adolescents want to give their parents ideas about their future living arrangement, often called a parenting plan.
9. Many children will ask why the divorce is occurring. This is normal, and some brief answer is appropriate. Here are some ideas: We are not happy living

together. We find ourselves being very angry at each other, sometimes fighting, and this isn't a good way for adults or children to live. We have tried to make things better between us, but we just weren't able to. Over the years, we have grown apart from each other, and don't love each other anymore. (Reassure them that parents' love doesn't stop).