

Helping parents say the hardest thing: Talking to children about divorce

Elisa Reiter and Daniel Pollack | April 13, 2026



"Psychologists call this a 'critical incident' -- a moment that shapes how kids encode memory, stress, and meaning. For many, it becomes a flashbulb memory: I remember where I was sitting, what Dad's voice sounded like, even the shirt Mom wore. That memory becomes the anchor point for how they explain to themselves what happened to their family."

— [Deborah Gilman, PhD, Anchored](#)

Few conversations in a family's life carry more weight than the one in which parents tell their children that the marriage is ending. Whether the children are toddlers who can barely form sentences or adults who have long suspected trouble, the disclosure of divorce is a defining moment. As family law attorneys, therapists, mediators, and coaches who work with families in transition, we have a responsibility to help our clients approach that conversation with intention, clarity, and compassion.

Deborah Gilman, Ph.D., captures the psychological gravity of this moment in her book [Anchored](#). The passage quoted above reminds us that how and what children are told during this disclosure can become a permanent cognitive and emotional anchor point. Children will return to their memory of that first conversation again and again to make sense of what happened to their world. That is a sobering reality, and it is why preparation matters.

What the research actually tells us

Parents often carry enormous guilt, assuming that the decision to divorce is itself the source of lasting harm to their children. The research, however, tells a more nuanced and ultimately more hopeful story.

[Paul Amato's work, beginning in 1991](#), and his [landmark 2010 meta-analysis](#) and the complementary work of [Joan Kelly and Robert Emery](#), consistently demonstrate that it is not necessarily the divorce itself that most damages children. Rather, it is the [level of conflict, secrecy, and instability](#) surrounding the divorce that accounts for the majority of negative outcomes. Children who are kept in the dark, who witness ongoing hostility between their parents, or who experience repeated disruptions in their daily routines are the ones most likely to struggle, and

not simply because their parents separated, but because of how that separation was handled.

This distinction is profoundly important for the work we do with clients. It means that parents retain real agency. The outcome for their children is not sealed the moment the decision to divorce is made. It is shaped, day by day and conversation by conversation, by how parents manage disclosure, conflict, and co-parenting.

The long view offered by [Judith Wallerstein's landmark longitudinal study](#) reinforces this point. Wallerstein and her colleagues followed 131 children from divorcing families for twenty-five years, and what they found was striking in its complexity. In [The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce \(Hyperion, 2000\)](#), Wallerstein reported that at the twenty-five-year follow-up, 30 percent of participants were doing poorly with significantly impaired functioning, while 34 percent were in the average range, and 36 percent were doing very well to outstanding across all life domains. Her research further revealed that the effects of divorce frequently emerged or intensified in young adulthood, particularly around children's own intimate relationships. Children who had been shielded from chronic conflict, who received consistent parenting, and whose emotional needs were acknowledged consistently fared far better than those who were caught in unresolved parental hostility.

The practical implication provides guidance: The way parents talk to their children about divorce (what they say, when they say it, and how they conduct themselves afterward) matters enormously.

Preparing for the conversation

Before addressing the age-specific considerations, a few universal principles apply regardless of the children's ages. First, both parents should be present for the initial

disclosure whenever possible. This communicates a united front and signals that both parents remain committed to the children even as the marriage ends. Second, the conversation should happen before children notice physical changes such as one parent moving out. Discovering change before being told about it breeds anxiety and distrust. Third, children should not be told about the divorce in passing, during a fight, or through a third party. Fourth, parents should agree in advance on what they will say and what they will not say. Disparaging the other parent during this conversation inflicts harm that research consistently links to poor adjustment outcomes.

The four questions every child is asking

Whatever a child's age, Dr. Gilman identifies in [Anchored](#) four core questions that sit at the heart of every child's experience of parental divorce. Children may not articulate these questions aloud. They may not even be conscious of asking them. Yet, they are organizing their entire emotional response around the search for answers:

1. *“What is happening?”* Children need a clear, honest, and age-appropriate account of the change that is taking place in their family. Ambiguity and evasion do not protect them; they feed anxiety.
2. *“What does this mean for me?”* Children think concretely and personally. They want to know where they will sleep, whether they will change schools, what holidays will look like, and who will be at their games and recitals. The abstract adult narrative of relationship dissolution matters far less to them than the specific shape of their daily life going forward.

3. *“Do you still love me?”* Young children in particular struggle to distinguish between a parent leaving a marriage and a parent leaving them. This question must be answered directly, repeatedly, and through actions as much as words.

4. *“Did I cause this?”* As noted above, egocentric thinking is developmentally normal in children of all ages, and it does not disappear entirely in adolescence. Children need an explicit, unambiguous statement that the divorce is not their fault and that nothing they could have done would have changed the outcome.

Before the children: Telling your spouse you want a divorce

The conversation with the children cannot be prepared in isolation. It depends, in large part, on how the initial disclosure to a spouse was handled. A spouse who is blindsided by a sudden announcement delivered in anger or in the midst of a fight is unlikely to be ready to sit beside their partner the next morning and deliver a calm, unified message to their children. The way spouses communicate their intention to divorce shapes the co-parenting trajectory from the very first moment. Some recommendations:

Choose the right time and setting. Do not deliver this news during a heated argument, in a public place, immediately before a major family event, or when one or both of you is impaired, exhausted, or emotionally flooded. Choose a private, calm setting where both of you can speak and react without an audience. Avoid initiating the conversation when children are in the next room.

Be direct, but not brutal. Clarity is kindness. Vague statements that leave room for misinterpretation, such as "I need space" or "I don't know what I want," can prolong false hope and ultimately deepen the wound. If the decision is made, say so clearly: "I have thought about this carefully, and I believe our marriage has come to an end. I want to talk with you about how we move forward."

Do not make it a negotiation, but do make space for response. If the decision is final, do not present it as a discussion about whether to divorce. That creates a cruel and false dynamic. However, allow space for your spouse to respond, to grieve, and to ask questions. The first conversation does not need to resolve everything. Its purpose is disclosure, not logistics.

Avoid blame and grievance cataloguing. The urge to justify the decision by listing the other person's failures is understandable but almost universally counterproductive. It invites defensiveness, argument, and the kind of explosive conflict that can permanently poison co-parenting. Lead with "I" statements that describe your own experience rather than "You" accusations about theirs.

Frame what comes next around the children, even in this first conversation. Wherever possible, signal from the outset that you intend to co-parent thoughtfully: "Whatever happens between us, I want us to figure out how to do right by the kids." This plants an early seed that the divorce need not be a war, and it establishes a shared purpose that can anchor subsequent difficult conversations.

Consider involving a professional before this conversation. A therapist, mediator, or collaborative divorce attorney can help a client prepare language, anticipate their spouse's reactions, and develop a plan for stabilizing the household in the days immediately following disclosure. This is not a sign of weakness. It is a sign of seriousness about protecting the family.

Age by age: What children need to hear and how they hear it

Infants and toddlers (Birth to Age 2)

Very young children do not understand the concept of divorce, but they are exquisitely attuned to their environment. They respond to tone of voice, physical

availability, and emotional consistency. The "conversation" for this age group is not verbal. It is behavioral. Maintaining feeding schedules, sleep routines, and warm physical contact is the message. Minimize transitions during periods of volatility, and ensure that both parents remain present and predictable figures whenever possible.

Preschool age (Ages 3 to 6)

Children in this range are egocentric by developmental design. Their first instinct is to believe they caused the divorce. Parents must proactively address this: "This is not because of anything you did. This is a grown-up decision, and it is not your fault." Explanations should be simple and concrete: "Daddy/Mommy is going to live in a different house, and you will see him on these days." Avoid abstractions about love changing or people growing apart. Focus on what remains the same. Both parents still love them. They will still go to their school and have their routines. Expect regression in toilet training, sleep, and separation anxiety. This is normal and temporary.

Early school age (Ages 7 to 10)

Children in this range understand more and therefore worry more. They are likely to ask direct questions and to seek someone to blame. They may fantasize about reconciliation long after the decision is final. Be honest, but age-appropriate: "We have tried to work things out, but we have decided we will be better parents to you if we live separately." Acknowledge their feelings directly: "It makes sense that you feel sad and angry. Those feelings are okay." Watch for somatic complaints (stomachaches, headaches, and school avoidance) as expressions of emotional distress. Maintain consistent contact with teachers and school counselors during the transition.

Preteens (Ages 11 to 14)

The preteen years are already a period of identity disruption, and divorce compounds this. Children this age are highly attuned to fairness and to the idea that one parent may have wronged the other. They are at high risk of being triangulated into adult conflict. Resist the temptation to share adult grievances, financial concerns, or relationship details, even when children ask probing questions. Validate their anger and confusion without feeding it with information they cannot carry: "I know you want to understand everything, and I understand why. But some of this is between me and your mom/dad, and it is not something you need to carry." Allow them age-appropriate input into custody schedules without burdening them with the decision.

Teenagers (Ages 15 to 18)

Teenagers are capable of understanding the divorce in far greater complexity, but complexity is not always comfort. Many will respond with anger, withdrawal, or by throwing themselves into activities outside the home. Some will vote with their feet, gravitating toward the parent they perceive as less responsible for the disruption. Treat them with honesty and respect while still maintaining appropriate boundaries: "You deserve to understand what is happening in our family. I will answer your questions as honestly as I can." Acknowledge that their lives are also being disrupted and that their grievance is valid. Do not make them your confidant nor your emotional support. They need a parent, not a peer.

Adult children

There is a persistent cultural assumption that adult children are largely unaffected by their parents' divorce. [Wallerstein's research](#) challenged that view directly, demonstrating that adult children often experience a profound loss of family

identity, a retroactive questioning of their childhood memories, and heightened anxiety about their own relationships. They may feel pressure to take sides, to manage one or both parents' emotional needs, or to serve as intermediaries. Parents should tell adult children clearly and directly, together if possible, and with the same core message: This is a decision between the two of us, and we are not asking you to choose. Acknowledge that this affects them too, even as adults.

Protecting children during and after the divorce

Children are not messengers

One of the most corrosive habits that develops in high-conflict separations is the use of children to carry information, requests, or grievances between parents. It is easy to understand how it starts. Direct communication between spouses has broken down. Conversations escalate. It feels easier to say, "Tell your father/mother the check hasn't arrived," or "Ask your mother/father what time s/he's picking you this weekend." Each individual instance may seem trivial. It's not.

When a child is used as a message carrier, they are placed in an impossible position. They become an instrument of adult logistics in a conflict they did not create and cannot resolve. They absorb the anxiety of both households. They risk becoming the bearer of bad news and being associated, in one parent's mind, with the other parent's failures. Perhaps most damagingly, they begin to feel responsible for the communication between their parents, a burden that is developmentally inappropriate at every age.

The solution is straightforward in principle and requires discipline in practice: Parents must communicate directly with each other, through whatever channel is least inflammatory. For many families in the acute phase of separation, that means

text or email rather than phone calls, or a co-parenting communication platform such as [OurFamilyWizard](#) or [TalkingParents](#), which create a documented, tone-modulated record of exchanges. The medium matters less than the commitment. Children should never be the conduit.

The cost of speaking ill of the other parent

Research on the [resist/refuse dynamic](#) is unambiguous: Children who are repeatedly exposed to one parent denigrating the other suffer measurable harm to their self-concept, their emotional adjustment, and their capacity for healthy attachment. This is not merely a matter of good manners. It is a matter of psychological safety.

A child is, in the most literal sense, half of each parent. When one parent is attacked in the child's presence, the child does not simply hear criticism of another adult. They absorb an implicit message about half of who they are. The parent who says, "Your father/mother is selfish and irresponsible," is not merely characterizing a former spouse. They are telling a child something about the child's own origins, identity, and lovability.

This does not mean parents must pretend that nothing went wrong or that their feelings do not exist. It means those feelings belong in a therapist's office, a trusted friend's kitchen, or a support group, not in front of the children. It means that when children ask hard questions, parents answer honestly, but with restraint: "Your dad/mom and I had a hard time getting along, and we decided we would do better living separately" is truthful. It protects the child. It does not require a single word of disparagement.

Practitioners can help clients understand that every derogatory comment made about a co-parent in a child's presence is, in effect, a withdrawal from the child's

emotional account. The balance matters. Children need to feel safe loving both parents without guilt, and that safety is entirely within the parents' power to provide or withhold.

Civility as the foundation of co-parenting

The tone of the initial disclosure conversation, between spouses and then with children, does not exist in isolation. It sets a precedent. It establishes what kind of separation this will be, at least in aspiration, and it communicates to both parties whether collaborative co-parenting is a realistic goal or a polite fiction.

Attorneys, therapists, and mediators who work in family law know that the early weeks and months of a separation are formative. Patterns established in that period tend to calcify. A spouse who was told about the divorce in a spirit of respect, who was given honest information and reasonable time to respond, who was not publicly humiliated nor blindsided, is a spouse who is more likely to sit across a table in mediation and work toward a parenting plan in good faith. A spouse who was ambushed, shamed, or threatened is a spouse who may approach every subsequent interaction as an adversary. What can we, as practitioners, do to help our clients and patients de-escalate dissolution of the marital relationship?

This is not a sentimental observation. It is a practical one. The research on post-divorce co-parenting quality consistently identifies the pre-divorce spousal relationship, specifically its level of mutual respect and communication, as one of the strongest predictors of how well parents will collaborate after the decree is entered. [Amato's research](#) confirms that cooperative co-parenting is among the most powerful buffers available to children of divorce. It does not eliminate the pain of family reorganization, but it substantially reduces its lasting footprint.

The pendency of a divorce case is often the most volatile period. Financial stress, housing transitions, attorney involvement, and the absence of settled routines all create conditions in which conflict can spread. Clients need guidance not just on the disclosure conversation but on sustaining a floor of civil conduct throughout the legal process. That means responding to co-parenting communications in a timely and businesslike manner. It means attending school events without engineering confrontations. It means honoring agreed-upon schedules even when doing so is inconvenient. And, it means modeling for the children the extraordinary grace of two adults who no longer love each other as spouses but who have chosen to remain united in their commitment to the people they love and whom they parent.

That commitment is not born in the final decree. It is born, or abandoned, in the very first conversations. Practitioners who help clients approach those conversations with care and intention are not simply managing a legal transition. They are helping to shape the emotional architecture of a family that, in its new form, will endure for the rest of those children's lives.

The long road after the first conversation

Gilman's concept of the ["flashbulb memory"](#) is a reminder that the first conversation is the anchor, but it is not the only conversation that matters. Children need repeated reassurance, ongoing access to both parents, and consistent messaging that the family, though restructured, continues. As practitioners, our role is to help clients understand that they cannot control whether their children are hurt by the divorce. They can control whether their children feel safe, informed, and loved throughout it.

By guiding parents to approach the conversation and the transition that follows with forethought, civility, and a primary focus on the child's well-being, practitioners empower them to mitigate the trauma of divorce and establish a foundation for their family's resilient future.

Elisa Reiter, a Senior Attorney with Calabrese Budner, LLP in Dallas, Texas, is Board Certified in Family Law and in Child Welfare Law by the Texas Board of Legal Specialization. In addition to her law practice, she also serves as an Adjunct Professor at SMU Dedman School of Law. Mrs. Reiter is admitted to practice in Texas, the District of Columbia, Massachusetts, and New York. Contact: elisa@calabresebudner.com.

Daniel Pollack, MSW, JD is a professor at Yeshiva University's School of Social Work. He is co-author of *Domestic Abuse, Child Custody, and Visitation: Winning in Family Court*. He was also a Commissioner of Game Over: Commission to Protect Youth Athletes, an independent blue-ribbon commission created to examine the institutional responses to sexual grooming and abuse by former USA Gymnastics physician Larry Nassar. Contact: dpollack@yu.edu.

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