

Talk with Your Kids

Provide age-appropriate explanations about what is happening

BY KENNETH D. HERMAN

You're getting divorced. You're worried about money, the future, what happened to your marriage. And, almost certainly, you are concerned about what this is going to do to your children. Nearly every parent facing divorce—whether he or she wanted the divorce or not—worries deeply about the possible effect of divorce on the children. Will this scar them permanently? Will this make them unable to commit to marriage and family when it's their turn? Will they become depressed, withdrawn, do poorly in school? Or will they become angry and act out in antisocial ways?

Research has shown that much of the answer lies in how you and your spouse interact with your children and with each other during and after your divorce. What you communicate to the children, both in words and behavior, about the divorce itself, about the other parent, and about your own state of mind will significantly affect how the divorce will impact your children.

You have considerable power to mitigate or even eliminate long-term difficulty for your child. That does not mean that you can keep your children from feeling emotional pain, but it does mean that you can prevent them from being harmed developmentally.

First, remember that you've had a lot of practice helping your children learn about important matters and understand what troubles them. What you've learned over the years will help you now. Remember, too, to be patient with yourself.

You may feel unsure of yourself for several reasons. Perhaps you are feeling troubled or guilty about what is happening to your children, i.e., how they will cope and be affected. That worry can undermine your self-confidence. Second, this is uncomfortable and unfamiliar territory for you and your children. Third, your own feelings of vulnerability and pain generally are not so close to the surface when you talk with your children about other important subjects; now they are.

Have a plan

With those ideas in mind, plan how and when to tell your children about the divorce. First, figure out what you will say *before you say it* (and get help if you get lost in this process). Before you say a word, your children will see the seriousness of your facial expression and will become anxious. Calling the children together, getting them worried, but then hemming and hawing will unnecessarily prolong the painful suspense for them.

Many children whose parents are

facing divorce will have long sensed that there is difficulty brewing, but even so, most feel profoundly saddened and frightened when they are told what is about to happen. Reassure them from the very beginning by being clear and focused as you tell them the truth.

If at all possible, coordinate with your spouse as to how and when to tell the children. Tell them together if both of you are *sure* that your facial expressions, body language, and your sidelong glances will not communicate that you blame one another. By handling this difficult task together, your children will be reassured that you are working together for them. They will understand that although the family will change, it *will* continue. Brothers and sisters can provide a lot of emotional support for one another just by *hearing* together and *feeling* together.

Try to remember that most children feel shock, sadness, and fear or worry initially. If possible, when you tell the children about the coming separation, have the next steps worked out with your spouse so that you can tell them not just what is coming apart, but also what the two of you have already arranged to start rebuilding. Who is leaving the house? When? Where is that parent going? How and when will the children talk to or see that parent?

Be ready to answer questions. If you hear only silence, gently bring the children into the discussion. Don't force them to participate, but encourage them to join in. Expect questions about whether there will be enough money, when will they see the parent who is leaving, or where will a beloved pet live.

Try very hard to avoid self-pity when you tell your children about the divorce. Your focus at that moment needs to be on your children and their well-being and what is happening to them, not on your own pain. Never look to your children for emotional support during your divorce.

A balanced approach

Be realistic, but don't mislead the children about how difficult the coming changes are going to be. At the same time, try not to focus only on the negatives.

Even though it is difficult for most parents to understand, many children leap to the conclusion that they are somehow responsible for the divorce. Even if they haven't verbalized such feelings, reassure them that the divorce is between their parents and that they are not to blame. Talk about your hopes for the future. Let them know that you are both going to work hard to keep what is happening between you as spouses from impacting your joint commitment to their well being.

Keep in mind that your child's sense of time may be quite different from yours. You know that today will end and tomorrow will begin, but for young children "now" can seem like an eternity. Talk about the timeline in ways they can grasp.

Don't ask your children for reassurance. It is up to you to reassure them to the extent you can. If you ask them, they will likely end up feeling that they have failed you because, after all, they are even less able than you to predict the future.

As the initial shock of the divorce

wears off and the family begins to rebuild itself in a different form, your children will look to you for clues as to how to react, how to comprehend what is happening, and how to behave. This is not new to them or to you; they have done so throughout their lives and will naturally do so now *because* you are the parent.

Your words, behavior, and emotional expressions give them clues as to how to comprehend what is happening and how to respond, rebuild, and reorganize. That comprehension and understanding will serve as the platform upon which your child will reorganize her or his thoughts and feelings about family and self.

A few guidelines can help you be the best parent you can be as you and your family approach this new challenge.

1. Trust yourself. You've raised your children and you know them. You

**Be realistic,
but don't mislead
the children
about how difficult
the coming changes
are going to be**

can figure out how to say what you need to tell them. As you've always done, make sure your language is age-appropriate and do not overwhelm your children with more information or new concepts than they can manage. Practice finding ways to tell the truth without telling more than they can grasp or absorb. Remind yourself that you have learned over the years since the birth of your children to find balance in sharing information with them.

2. Take care of yourself. Remember that you are the responsible adult and you need to take care of yourself so that you can fulfill your responsibilities to your children during this dif-

ficult time. Do not hesitate to get help if you can't handle it on your own.

3. Consider each of your children as the unique individuals they are. No two children will respond to your separation and divorce in an identical way. Many factors, including your child's temperament, age, ability to work with abstract concepts, and the history of your interaction with her or him has contributed to the creation of a unique child. Even though this is a new arena for you as a parent, remember that you understand and know your child. You know how to parent this child. Next, move that knowledge and skill into this new chapter of your parenting.

4. Just as at any other time of confusion or puzzlement, your child will look to you for direction in thinking about and understanding what is happening. Children listen to your words and watch your behavior. That's only natural. You are the parent, and your children have been learning from you since birth.

5. Above all, protect your children's trust in you. Your children look to you for many things: protection, direction, limits, acceptance, and so on. They also look to you for truth and for protection from the sort of information that they are not developmentally able to handle.

Never lie to your child, but at the same time never harm your child by disclosing more than he or she needs to know or should know. Be honest with yourself about the distinction between what your child needs to know and what feelings and thoughts you need to share *with an appropriate listener*.

Nearly every divorcing person will be tempted to share negative feelings about the other parent with a child and justify doing so: "I cannot lie; my child is entitled to the truth." If you think the level of child support is too low, it is easy to slip and say, "No, sweetheart, you can't go to the movies. Your father

does not give us enough money to go to the movies." Or, "No, sweetheart, we can't go to the movies. The court makes me give all my money to your mother."

Is this a "truth" your child should hear from you? Simply be honest about what is truth and what truth should be told to the children.

6. *Help your children anticipate what will happen next.* Give them a roadmap and timeline that they can understand. Do not allow them to be caught offguard with each new chapter in the divorce process. Doing so may be difficult because it will force you to focus on coming realities as well. Many of us try to avoid difficult things until we no longer can avoid them. Sometimes we really *don't* know, for example, what our financial situation will be in a year? One benefit of keeping your children current and giving them forecasts of what is to come is that you will always be prepared for what is coming next rather than avoiding what is too difficult to think about.

7. Anticipate the high level of disruption, change, and stress that is bound to accompany separation and divorce. So many simultaneous changes can be overwhelming. Pace yourself so that your children do not see you being overwhelmed. The financial strain, the massive change in routine, the logistical difficulties that need to be ironed out, the new ways of interacting that every divorcing person needs to learn, all converge at once and can leave you reeling.

Be disciplined and focus only on what you can manage at any particular time. Remember, when your children see you as overwhelmed, they lose confidence in your ability to manage. Young children need to believe that you are invincible. Teenagers are less reliant on your invincibility, but they need to believe that you are fully in control. You don't need to pretend, but a calm "I don't know but I am working on figuring it out" can reassure your child

that you are competent at the helm.

8. *Listen and observe.* Be alert to concerns your children might be feeling, whether voiced or not. Address those concerns when your child seems ready.

9. *Check in regularly with your child, but don't push too hard.* Give your child an opportunity to talk or ask or complain, but don't demand it.

10. *Avoid saying or doing anything that will make your children wonder whether they should feel differently about the other parent.* Children know how they have felt so far, but this is new, scary territory and they fear lots can change. Don't confuse them by suggesting, no matter how unintentionally, that their feelings need to change to fit the new situation *as you see it.*

11. Whenever you are about to talk to your children, do a brief "attitude self-examination" before saying anything. Most of us have the capacity to prevent negative feelings about our spouse from coloring what we say to our children. Never damage your children's love for the other parent.

12. Your child is not your confidante; find your own adult support network elsewhere. The fact that you have children, as you face this major set of changes in your life, might feel emotionally supportive. That is wonderful, but finding comfort in your parenthood is different from turning to your children for emotional support. An honest and calm discussion about your feelings is fine when the children make clear they want to know, but remember that sharing your feelings is quite different from venting and using your child as a confidante.

13. A raised eyebrow, a smirk, or even silence can communicate a great deal of profoundly troubling information to a child.

14. Don't fool yourself into believing that your child is not hearing or feeling every word you say when you spell selected words into the phone or talk in a hushed voice

or turn your back so the child will not see. Don't talk about what is going on unless you are *really* sure that your child cannot hear. Remember that your child is on "high alert" from the moment he or she first suspects trouble until the time a "normal" life is reestablished.

15. *Don't rush your children.* After such a major disruption to their lives, children need time to get their sea legs back and reestablish the full scope of relationships with you and the other parent. Give them that time. Don't try to move them along faster than they are ready to move. Each child's pace will be different. Maintain as many family routines as possible in the context of divorce. Continue many of the rituals you and your child shared before the disruption.

New relationships

16. *Don't introduce a significant other while your child is reorganizing and rebuilding a relationship with you.* You may have been searching for and settling into a new way of life for quite some time, but remember that this is all new to your child. Your child began processing this divorce long after you began your work.

17. *Don't behave in ways that will lead your child to conclude that the sky is falling.* When you became a parent, you took an oath to protect your child. Work on your own feelings of rage or bewilderment or terror on your own time, not during parenting time. Plan ahead to ensure that your children are "covered" when you need to fall apart, and get yourself back together before you move back into the care-giving role.

This is especially true with very young children, who are seriously attuned to your feelings and emotional state, sometimes far more than to what you say. Remember, you are the parent. Your child needs to believe that no matter how bad you feel, you won't lose your footing as a parent.

Conclusion

Most children do become temporarily disrupted in various ways when their parents separate and divorce. However, if children are included in the process in age-appropriate ways and simultaneously protected from potentially harmful behaviors of their parents, lasting damage can be minimized.

What you say to your children in words, what you communicate through behavior, and how you and your spouse interact during the divorce are key to determining how your children will respond. For most families, divorce is unfamiliar terrain. Your children may be fearful or pretend to be cool or indifferent, but they are far from cool or indifferent. Allow them sufficient time to understand what is happening and regain their bearings. Reassure your children that there will be many changes, but you and their other parent will continue to be Mom and Dad and will continue to work together on their behalf.

For most children, even though each parent retains individual characteristics as a separate person, there is the luxurious feeling that the "parental unit" is invincible and magically powerful. It is inevitable that the child would worry that such cohesion will be shattered by the divorce. However, by working cooperatively with your spouse, that loss can be minimized for your child. ■



Kenneth D. Herman, Ph.D., J.D., is a clinical psychologist and a lawyer in Boston, Massachusetts. He serves as director of the Children and the Law

Program at Massachusetts General Hospital, and maintains a practice in child and adolescent psychotherapy. He is on the faculty of Harvard Medical School and provides consultation to various agencies around psychological dysfunction in children and adolescents.