

## TELLING YOUR CHILDREN YOU WILL BE DIVORCING

When parents have reached a clear decision to tell their child(ren) they are getting separated or divorced, Dr. Bingham Newman offers this candid advice: “You have to keep that communication door open . . . communicate with kids! And if you haven’t been, then you’d better start.”

They will have been feeling the tension between you. Stay respectful and civil, even with your nonverbal language, in front of the children. Children of divorce, including Adult Children, do better depending on the degree *they’re shielded from your conflict/negative feelings and reactions* to one another.

A list of tips adapted (significantly) from Dr. Newman’s suggestions for divorcing parents to help them deliver the news to children:

1. Consider putting your younger children in therapy with a therapist specializing in divorce matters “as part of their education,” for at least a month *before* you tell them you’re divorcing. This allows them to already have a connection with the therapist, before they get the news.
2. Write and agree upon a joint Mission Statement for how you will approach the divorce/custody (see guidelines). Co-parenting specialists can help with this if needed.
3. Give a simple reason for the divorce, *without* “adult” details. (See guidelines for writing a blame-free, nonjudgmental Short Divorce Story that will be “the party line” for children and their extended communities).
4. Plan ahead for *exactly* when and what you are going to *say together*. Be honest and straightforward, *without* sharing adult details/drama. Include your combined Mission Statement, and Short Divorce Story. You are modeling how relationships end, and setting the stage for how your kids will end their own future relationships – whether those are short or long-term relationships.
5. *Make sure all family members are present*, including both parents and very young children when you share your short divorce story, together. That *sense of parental cohesion is critical even for adult kids*. Ideally, you are “restructuring” your family – not ripping it apart.
6. Identify a time to tell them when the kids’ will have plenty of free time afterwards, to feel whatever they feel, without major obligations or distractions, and to connect with you both as needed. Saturday mornings are often good times for this reason. After a couple of hours, consider going out *as a family* to a lunch and a light-hearted movie or similar activity, to provide a sense things can continue to be relatively “normal,” civil and respectful.
7. Do NOT assess blame. It truly takes two to tango. **Avoid all negative judgments**, and say explicit, positive things about your co-parent. Remember: half your child(ren)’s DNA (or if adopted, half their life experience and modeling) is sourced from your co-parent. *When you criticize your co-parent, you criticize your child(ren)*. They register and feel this and it does damage.
8. Emphasize that your children did not cause the divorce, and that there is nothing they could have done or can do to make the decision turn out differently. It’s *an adult decision* that affects them – that’s on both of you, and you can be sorry about the impact on them, but *they* didn’t cause it and they won’t be deciding the outcome (waaay too much responsibility to impose on them!). Adults will.
9. Emphasize that both parents will continue to love and care for the child(ren), and to be available, if this is true. As parents, do not compete for victim status. It’s a loss you *both* will experience.
10. Emphasize that your child(ren) are still part of a family – it’s just “restructured.”
11. Describe things you know will stay the same. Children need *as much stability and predictability as possible to feel safe*. Do NOT promise what you can’t.
12. Describe any immediate changes that will occur, in a matter-of-fact, very calm way. When there are changes you can’t know about yet, let them know *you will tell them, together, ahead of time, as soon as you know when/which changes will occur so that you/they have time to prepare for changes*. Don’t spring big changes on them without giving them time to think and prepare as it elevates their distress unnecessarily.
13. If your child(ren) are older, outline the steps you have taken to save the marriage, so they know this decision has been made with thoughtful and considerable effort to do otherwise. (Model!)

14. Acknowledge your children's feelings. Keep reflecting these. Don't defend or explain – *just understand*. Their feelings will come in cycles and waves. They may be angry, just quiet or sobbing. Love them. Together.
15. Encourage questions. But ***not*** about details of your relationship (“That’s not something we’ll be talking about.” “That’s really a grown-up issue between us.”)
16. Expect to repeat the information on more than one occasion. Keep reassuring them of your own and your co-parent’s love and availability. Review “Groundrules for Co-parenting” handouts.
17. Consider running your agreed-upon, child-centered narrative for telling the children about the divorce by a qualified mental health professional specializing in co-parenting and divorce ahead of telling them.