

Family Mediators Association

How Do We Tell the Children?

Telling children that you are splitting up is painful and difficult. You have already worked your way along the difficult path to the decision to separate or divorce. Your children are only just starting out on a journey that you may have more or less completed. It will come as a great shock to them, even if they have already suspected that it might happen.

What you have to do is extremely difficult for any parent and very painful for the whole family. In facing up to it, try to remember that many parents have had to do this before you. And, on a positive note, if this done with love and care by the two of you together, the children can survive it without too much damage - as long as you both follow it up with the same long-term love, care and consideration for your children as you did when you were partners.

You know your children best and are in the best position to think about their frame of mind and to look at what you both feel will be the most appropriate way of dealing with the situation. There are no hard and fast rules for how you should break the news. One of the difficulties is that you may hold very different views about the state of your relationship. It is of course very common for one of you to be clear that the relationship has broken down and the other earnestly to want a reconciliation. Being sensitive to this with the children is one of the hardest challenges, but it is essential that they receive one clear explanation of the situation, and not asked to choose between competing views or judge who may be "to blame".

However, there are some important factors that are common to all children:

- You need to consider their need for security - their need to know that you will both still always be their parents.
- They need the opportunity to express themselves and their feelings in whatever way they feel able. This could be anything from extreme anger to complete silence.
- You will need to weigh up whether you tell each child on their own, or all together or a combination of this. You need to make a joint decision as to which way *both* of you feel will be the best for your children and for you as their parents.

Telling them together

If you can manage to speak to them together, this will give an opportunity for them to see that you are not blaming each other, that they don't have to take sides, and that you are both still there for them.

Think about your own emotions. Will you be able to do this without getting into further conflict between the two of you? If you feel that you can, then try to think through together the sort of questions your children will be likely to ask. How will you answer them? Decide which questions you may not

be able to answer and how you will explain that at the moment you do not have the answers.

Even if it's not possible to speak to them together, try to agree a common form of words so that they can trust you are not undermining each other, or drawing them into any argument.

Where to do it?

At home is best if possible. It will feel safer for children and if they are upset they can show their emotions. If you are away from home, your task, and theirs, is much more difficult. Think about how you can make the physical, emotional and practical space for children to show their emotions. Allow plenty of time so that you can cope with the immediate reactions, and remember to be available at all times for delayed reactions.

Be honest...

Don't hedge and don't retract what you've said because they are upset. This will only cause more pain later by setting up false expectations that cannot be realised. It is important to be reassuring - but without making unrealistic promises. This is a very difficult task for parents, as we never want to feel that we have deliberately upset our children.

...but be realistic about what your child can understand

Think about what your child can understand at this stage. They are not adults and their perception and understanding are at a different stage. And remember - you are the people they love most and are closest to in their whole world. That won't change for them. They do not need to hear from either of you the faults of the other.

Allow children to express their emotions.

There may be tears, anger, pleading, promises of good behaviour, fear, bravado, denial. Don't try and stop this. Simply tell the child that you understand and know that it hurts, but that you will try to help them so that it hurts less. Make sure they understand that what has happened is not their fault and not because of anything they have done, but a decision made between their two parents.

Give them information - but not too much

Give them the details of future arrangements if these have been decided. Probable timing of events can be helpful for older children, but do not overwhelm them with too much information at first. Keep information to what you judge they can take in initially. Think about the age of each child and your own close knowledge of their level of understanding and be guided by that.

You can tell them if you wish that you are coming to see people to work out what is best for all of you and that you will tell them as soon as you know anything if this appropriate. Be specific but don't over explain. Try not to involve them in the solution or decision making unless they are old enough - and even then be aware that many children still prefer their parents to be the arbiters of what is best for them.

If one of you is moving out

It can help to involve the children in the move. Show them round your new home, and where their room will be when they visit you. Children worry a lot about the parent who is moving. Will s/he have enough to eat, where will s/he sleep? Will they be alright? Involving them can reassure them and makes sure that the fantasies are minimised. Of course, it may not be possible to do this - if for example, the parent is moving away. If this is the case tell them together what the visiting arrangements are (if you know them) so that they feel reassured that they will be seeing you regularly.

Talking it over

It can be helpful for children to talk to their friends. They may well have parents who have separated and can be reassuring. Watch out if your child tells no-one and be prepared to reassure them yourself that what is happening often happens in other families too. Ask them if they know anybody in the same situation. Tell them that you understand that sometimes it is difficult to talk.

When your children talk to you, don't be surprised if they tell each of you quite different things about the same situation. They will want to show their love and loyalties to you both - and also, sometimes, how cross they are or how unhappy. If you can manage as adults to keep talking to each other through his, it will help the children to understand that you remain, as their parents, together in your concern for them.

Reassure them

Reassure children that you will both go on being their parents. The fact you and your partner are unable to get on well together anymore does not in any way alter your feelings for them. Make sure you tell them that they are you will always be their mother and father and that your love for them will always remain the same.