

Explaining Separation/Divorce to Children

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General Tips

- Prepare yourself before addressing the issue with the child
- If possible, tell children together when the decision has been made. If this isn't viable, pick an appropriate time and place to tell your children. If there is a wide range in children's ages, it may be helpful later to talk to each one separately after the initial announcement to give more or less information according to age
- Although you may feel angry, it is damaging to your children to express your anger toward your former partner. Try your very best to shield your child from this anger. Also, do not make any negative comments about your former partner to your child
- Listen to and validate the child's feelings, and invite more (e.g.) "You feel sad. What do you feel most sad about?"
- Don't try to rescue the child from the hurt; not talking openly about difficult issues and painful feelings shuts the child down
- Reassure the child s/he will be cared for
- Make reassuring comments often. Children need repetition. It's Ok to say the same reassuring comment over and over again
- Praise your child often. Parents in the midst of separation/divorce are often caught up in their own feelings that they forget to focus on their child's positive behavior
- Don't criticize your ex-partner in front of your child. Remember that your ex-spouse is your child's parent. When you say negative remarks about your ex-spouse to your child, you damage your child
- Realize the importance of supporting your child's relationship with the other parent. Even though it may be very hard for you to do, say often to the child, "Your (other parent) loves you very much."

- Don't make child take sides. Say "You don't have to take sides, you can love mom and dad both the same"
- Set up regular visits with the non-residential parent and explain the schedule to the children
- Understand that children will react to the news in different ways. Depending on their age, they will do any or all of the following: act out, hit, regress (e.g. wet the bed, baby talk, clingy), withdraw, change in eating or sleeping habits, etc. Handle these behaviors by setting clear and consistent limits, and providing acceptable alternatives to their behavior. For example, "I know you feel angry that we have separated, but it is not OK to let out your anger by hitting. You can let out your anger by talking to me about your feelings." Do not punish babyish behavior— Give extra comfort and reassurance.
- Take responsibility for your own behavior. You cannot change your ex-partner's behavior, you can change and control yourself.
- Take care of yourself. The better you take care of yourself, the better you can care for your child.

What to Say

Start with a loving message, then give the difficult news, then make reassuring comments, and end with another loving statement

"Mom and dad have something important to talk with you about."

"Mom and dad love you very much."

"Mom and Dad are not happy together and cannot live together anymore, so we've decided to live in separate homes."

"No matter what, we love you very much."

Explain living and visiting arrangements: Parent who is leaving: "I am going to move to a new home today. You are going to live here with (i.e. Mommy) and keep going to the same school and see your friends. I will come see you on ___ (or) You will come to my

new home on _____. You will have a place to sleep at my house too because I will always be your Mommy/Daddy.”

Invite questions: “Do you have any questions? You can ask or say anything and I won’t be mad at you.”

(If child asks a question you don’t have the answer to) “That’s a good question. Unfortunately I can’t answer that. I know it’s hard to feel confused and uncertain.”

Reassuring comments:

Alleviate the child’s guilt by repeatedly saying, “Nothing you did or said made this happen. You did nothing wrong or bad”

Relieve child’s pressure to get you to reconcile by saying: “You did nothing to make this happen and you cannot do anything to make us get back together.”

Reassure child that your sadness is not the child’s fault: “I am sure this is very upsetting for you, Mom and dad are also upset. You may see us looking upset or even crying—even though we are sad, we are OK and we are here to take care of you. I am not upset because of anything you said or did.”

Reassure child that some things will stay the same: “Some things may change, like when and how much time you spend with each of us, but lots of things will stay the same, like you will still go to the same school, and see your friends...”

Reassure child that you will not leave too: “Since dad left, you may be worried that I will leave too. But I am not leaving. I am here to take care of you.”

Validate and normalize child’s feelings: “I know you feel _____. Whatever you are feeling is normal and OK.”

About The Author

Liana Lowenstein, MSW, is a Registered Social Worker and a Certified Child Psychotherapist specializing in the treatment of traumatized children and their families. She has authored numerous books that include *Creative Interventions for Troubled Children and Youth*, *More Creative Interventions for Troubled Children and Youth*, *Creative Interventions for Bereaved Children*, and *Creative Interventions for Children of Divorce*. She is a clinical supervisor and consultant, and a sought-after international speaker. Contact the author: (Tel) 416-575-7836 (Email) liana@globalserve.net (Web) www.lianalowenstein.com

