



NEW BEGINNINGS CO PARENTING NEWSLETTER

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Children and Divorce

When do we tell our children we're divorcing?

It's important to make sure that the decision to divorce is final before telling your children about the divorce. The mistake that some people make is to tell their children they're going to get a divorce when they're not sure the divorce will actually happen. This may heighten children's anxiety unnecessarily. Your children will have a reaction to your divorce, but it can play out in many different ways. Some children may try to negotiate reconciliation and they may feel that they're responsible for your divorce. So, telling children before you actually split up may be a problem, and therefore, I advise that you don't tell your children until you're really ready to move to different households. It's typically much easier for children to understand what divorce means when they actually "live" the divorce and can see their parents transitioning to two separate households. Younger children have little conceptual framework with which to understand a separation and divorce. What they can understand is that parents are going to live in two different houses. Children under the age of five understand that their parents are going to still be their parents, but live in two separate houses. Five to ten year olds might feel very badly about their parents divorcing because they're in a position of developing peer relationships, understanding more about relationships, and they will understand the idea of divorce. Since they understand some of these concepts, they might feel that it's their fault or that they have done something wrong. Sometimes, they'll hear their parents argue about parenting, and feel that they have actually been the cause of the divorce. Teenagers and pre-teens usually get angry because at a time when they're trying to separate, they want to feel they're separating from something solid and they want to feel like they still have their anchor to move away from. In addition, they may feel like they have to take care of their parents at a time when they are very focused on themselves. This can lead to parentification. What teens really want to do is identify with their peers. It can be confusing to suddenly have their parents say, "I need you as a friend, a peer, a support system". It's important that parents remain the role models and stay in the parent role. Parents should get outside adult support systems to help them through the divorce process, this way they can be there for their children, vs. asking the children to take care of them.

Will a support group help our children cope with divorce?

You have to gauge how your child is dealing with this divorce. If you start seeing your child being disorganized, in other words, his/her normal patterns are changing: the child's unhappy, they're becoming more aggressive, they're withdrawing, they're having problems sleeping at night, they're not eating, teachers are reporting to you they're not doing well in school, then they're going to need more support. They're either going to need the support of an individual counselor or a support group where they can share their feelings with other children who are going through the same things that they are going through. It is very important, though, to observe your children keenly. All children are going to go through some sense of loss, but if you feel that they can't seem to handle the sadness or loss in the progressive way that children typically do then you should intervene and get them professional help.

How honest should we be with our children about the reasons for your divorce?

Some parents feel the need to tell their children the truth about why their marriage ended, "Your father had an affair, he cheated, he had a girlfriend and he's a jerk", too much adult information and honesty is actually hurtful to your children. When these parents are asked why they do that they say, "Because I want my child to know the truth." However, parents are selective about this. Interestingly, they won't tell the truth about their own behavior, they won't tell the truth about all kinds of things, and they will somehow feel that this truth is paramount. Well, here's the real truth. Telling your child too many adult details is really destructive to a child. This is self-serving to the parent, and doesn't help the children. Telling a child that the other parent is bad is only in service of a parent's need to develop an alignment with that child and to have that child estranged from the other parent because the parent is estranged from that parent. The parent's anger is spilling over onto the child, they're projecting it onto the child, they're saying, "He was a lousy partner and therefore he's going to be a lousy parent and you should know it." And it's really unfair to the child; it's really parent-centered, not child-centered. Be honest within reason, be honest to the degree that it helps your child, but don't involve the child in the adult details of the divorce, keep them out of the middle, they don't need to know about anybody's shenanigans, they don't need to know about anybody's breaches of trust, and they don't need to see declarations in court, court papers and hear adult conversations because all it will do is make them feel anxious, and unfortunately, make them choose sides, which ultimately is a disservice to your child(ren). Children should be free to love both of their parents in whatever manner THEY choose. So, what can you say to your children? A simple statement such as, "Mommy and Daddy are getting divorced because we are not happy as husband and wife. We want to put our energy into what does make us happy and that is going to be parenting you. We will live in separate households, but we will continue to parent you." Sometimes a simple explanation of how the divorce will affect the children's lives is more salient to them, i.e., show them a calendar outlining which days they will live at which parent's home, talk to them about which aspects of their life will change and which ones will stay the same.