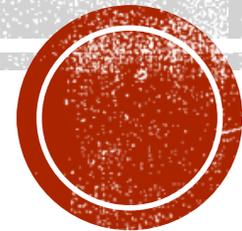


TIPS FOR PARENTS

A Resource for Parents



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HOW TO TELL THE KIDS

By Maggie Salter, PhD, Clinical Psychologist

For parents who are divorcing, the hardest task is how to tell their children about the impending divorce. Mediation provides a forum for parents to discuss the concepts and practicalities that will allow the parents to do this in a caring way and give the children an opportunity to digest the changes and express their feelings. Ideally, the parents will agree to tell the children together. This demonstrates that the parents will co-operate in taking care of the children and that both parents will remain involved with the children. Even if one parent has already told the children or one parent has moved out, they should sit down with their children together to talk about what the divorce will mean to all of them. All the children should be told at the same time; they will support and comfort each other in a way no one else can. It is not fair to isolate one child with "secret" news about the divorce that cannot be shared with other siblings.

Although there is no good time for bad news, parents should select a time when everyone is usually home and will not be running off to school, work or sports. Everyone needs time to process what will be said. Staying home for awhile afterwards also demonstrates that the feelings are not so scary or dangerous that they drive someone out or banish someone.

Parents might start off saying something like, "you've probably noticed a lot of arguing or tension lately, and we have decided to get a divorce." Parents should assure the children that they still love them, and that parents do not divorce their children. Parents should be extremely clear that this is a decision between the grown-ups and it is not the children's fault. There is nothing the children did to cause the divorce; neither is there anything the children could have done to prevent it. Parents should explain that most kids feel sad and angry when they can't live with both parents at once. They will probably feel that way also, and they should talk about their feelings.



HOW TO TELL THE KIDS CONT.

Children will want to know what changes will be happening: who will they live with and where, how often and when will they see the other parent, will they have to change schools or leave friends. If these decisions have been made, parents should tell the children. Parents should say that they will let the children know about the other arrangements as soon as they are made. Parents should not discuss money, debts, legal issues or other adult dilemmas with the children.

Parents could point out that this is a tough time for everyone and they will be available when their children want to talk about their feelings. The children should be asked if there is anything they want to say. Parents must be prepared to hear that the children are angry with them for not working things out. They can say that they tried to work things out but should not go into allegations of blame or criticism of each other. Parents can admit their own sadness at the break-up of the marriage, but assure children that both parents still love the children and will always be actively involved in their lives.



TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL CO-PARENTING

These ideas were inspired by the great work of Drs. Elizabeth Thayer and Jeffrey Zimmerman in their book The Co-Parenting Survival Guide.

- Here are a couple of small things we can do to help foster a better relationship with our child's other parents. As is so often the case in co-parenting relationships, they may be much easier said than done, but your children will benefit from your giving them a try.
- Make a new rule for yourself that you will no longer refer to your former partner as "My Ex." In doing so, we keep the emphasis on us, and we often inadvertently foster continuing animosity between the two parents. Instead, always refer to your former partner as "My son's Dad" or "My daughter's other parent." This keeps the focus where it needs to be: on our kids. We may no longer have a spouse, but our kids will always have two parents.

- Start every conversation with your child's other parent (written or verbal) with "Good Stuff." This means mentioning some of the great things (both big and small) that your child has done in the last week or so. This sets the tone for the conversation as being child focused and allows you both to enjoy some of the things you may have missed while being away from your child.
- "Fake it 'til you make it." You may be thinking, "Are those Kids First People CRAZY? I can't do this with my child's other parent." It may seem awkward or really emotionally difficult at first, but try, and keep trying. Your kids need you to.



NINE BASIC NEEDS OF PARENTS AND CHILDREN FOR A SUCCESSFUL ADAPTATION TO DIVORCE

By Kids Firstsm Center

Kids First has developed a list of *nine basic needs* of parents and children for a successful adaptation to divorce. We believe that when parents attempt to meet as many of these needs as possible under the circumstances, the children will benefit enormously. It is often not possible to meet all these needs at any one time.

Sometimes it is necessary to achieve a balance between competing needs. For example, the first basic need is that children need significant relationships with both parents, if possible. However, when there is violence or abuse in a family, safety needs to compete with relationship needs. As noted by Judith Wallerstein in *Surviving the Break-Up: How Children and Parents Cope with Divorce*:

In the real world, some parents are detrimental to their children. In such situations, it may be in the children's best interests not to have close contact with a parent. On the other hand, occasional contact may prevent children from idealizing an inadequate parent. These are complicated matters that need to be addressed case by case.

REMEMBER: these *nine basic needs* are presented as ideals to strive for when making decisions about your children's future and you own. No parent can achieve all of them all the time.



NINE BASIC NEEDS OF PARENTS AND CHILDREN FOR A SUCCESSFUL ADAPTATION TO DIVORCE, CONT.

1. Children benefit from significant relationships with both parents, to whatever extent possible.

Despite the conflicts between their parents, children usually remain attached to both of their parents. Being deprived of contact with one parent can lead to idealization of that parent and anger at the parent who is stifling that connection. A child will also feel less valued if one parent chooses not to maintain contact. Why doesn't my parent like me enough to reach out to me? When parents support each other's relationship with the children, children can gain from both parents. Each parent offers something different and important to each of the children.

2. Children benefit from being raised in an atmosphere where ongoing conflict and tension are minimized.

Children are often caught in the middle of conflict between parents. Parents may try to enlist their children as allies or use them as messengers or confidants. Even if they aren't directly involved, the tension of ongoing conflict doesn't allow children to focus on being themselves and enjoying life. Children who are caught between warring parents frequently suffer long-term emotional damage. In addition, children learn by observing their parents, and can acquire valuable skills in effective decision-making. But when the post-divorce relationship is conflict-ridden over a sustained period of time, children will experience only non-productive methods for dealing with conflict.



NINE BASIC NEEDS OF PARENTS AND CHILDREN FOR A SUCCESSFUL ADAPTATION TO DIVORCE, CONT.

3. Children have the right to physical and emotional safety.

Physical and emotional violence and substance abuse by parents has a major impact on children. It leaves them worrying about their own safety. Children need their home to be a safe space, if they are to be able to face the outside world with confidence.

4. Children in the midst of the divorce process continue to need effective parenting.

When adults are involved in a divorce their attention can easily become focused on their own needs and problems. Children, however, need their parents' attention and guidance more than ever. They need the safety of knowing that their parents are going to be there to supervise.

5. Children need significant amounts of environmental stability.

For children, home represents security. It is a place that is always familiar, that you can retreat to and relax. Any necessary changes should involve considerable preparation and support.

6. Children need adequate financial support, as well as the feeling that they are not a financial imposition.

When parents fight about money, children often get the sense that their needs place an undue burden on their parents. Money conflicts should remain only between the two parents. Financial decisions regarding children's needs should be made considering available resources, and decisions should not be held hostage to the financial conflicts between parents.



NINE BASIC NEEDS OF PARENTS AND CHILDREN FOR A SUCCESSFUL ADAPTATION TO DIVORCE, CONT.

7. Children need each parent to support the other parent's relationship with them.

When parents undermine each other, the child is often left in the middle, feeling torn. Children want to remain close to both their parents. The parent who supports their children's relationship with the other parent is the one who doesn't create emotional conflicts. In the long run, this is likely to result in a better relationship with the child.

8. Parents, after divorce, must find a new way of defining effective parenting.

"Shared parental rights and responsibilities" require parents to find a way of communicating and making joint decisions without the emotional intimacy of a marriage. Children need their parents to make decisions for them and to negotiate the details of their lives. To be done effectively, this requires focusing on the children's needs. Each parent must also learn a new way of parenting; they must be both the nurturer and the limit setter.

9. Parents need to develop new meaningful lives of their own.

Happy, well-adjusted parents who have lives of their own, independent of their children, make better parents. We are also models for our children. The ways we behave tell our children about what is possible.



TALKING WITH YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT REMARRIAGE

By Terri DeCoster Grasso

If you have decided to remarry, it is important to engage your children in a thoughtful conversation, understanding that they will have many and varied concerns about what this will mean to their lives. Just as when you divorced, you should plan a time and place for a discussion that will provide a comfortable and safe place for your children to express themselves. The first time you bring the subject up, you should tell all the children at the same time so there are no inconsistent messages or interpretations. Call the other biological parent either just before or immediately after you tell the children, and tell your children that their other biological parent knows.

You should expect that each of your children will have different questions, feelings and reactions when telling them about your plans to re-marry. Respond to each of them in the most honest way possible. If you don't have an answer, say so. Here are some of the most important messages to convey during your conversations:



TALKING WITH YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT REMARRIAGE CONT.

- Both of your parents will continue to love you just the same as before.
- You will still spend about the same amount of time with each of your parents (if true.) (If not true, explain, but provide lots of reassurance as you do so.)
- This may feel exciting sometimes and hard at other times. That happens to most kids. It probably will help if you tell adults how you are feeling about the changes.
- I always want to hear about these changes and how they are affecting you, even if you think I won't like what you have to say.

- In the end, you will have more people who care about you than you did before.
- Acknowledge feelings, always, even if they do not seem rationally based.
- Acknowledge disruptions in your children's lives, but offer strong statements of security to minimize those disruptions.
- You will make mistakes. That's okay. Get back to saying and doing the things you should and avoid the things you should not. Apologize to your children for your errors.

