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How to Break the News

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This is a very tough time in the lives of children and teenagers and so it needs to be handled with a lot of caution. Of course, nobody wants to live in a broken home, but often it is best for everyone that the parents separate.

If your home resembles more of a battlefield than a cozy nest, even your children could point out that a separation is in order. Even though it may seem as if splitting up could be damaging to the children, divorce is always preferable to watching your parents duel every day.

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Why Is It Important?

Remember, you're setting an example for your children, of how a romantic relationship should be. You surely don't want them to grow up believing that a dysfunctional marriage/cohabitation is what they should enter into one day. Just like every parent, you probably want your children to live better lives than the one you've had.

Even if your children have anticipated the dissolution of the relationship, you should still expect some level of grief. Lifestyle changes are hard on everyone. Besides, children may see your separation as something that places them in the middle of their parents' conflict, both of whom the children love. This could potentially make your kids feel pressured, if not handled well.

How to Tell Your Kids

Children and teenagers are very discerning and have probably already realized that something is wrong. They might have asked you why are you're fighting so much or perhaps they have even questioned if you and their other parent might separate. So if your mind is made up, it's best that you and your partner approach the subject as a team, and talk to your children together. If each one gives a separate, contradictory speech on the impending separation, it is highly likely that your children will only get confused and upset.

What to Say

This is a very delicate conversation and it is completely understandable that you may feel overwhelmed by it. Choosing the right way to address this topic is a challenge, both emotional and cognitive, for every parent. You can, however, achieve positive results if the conversation is a discussion, not a monologue, and if you use the key points listed below.

What Does It Mean to Get Separated?

It's always important to adjust your speech to their level of understanding and use age-appropriate vocabulary. But basically, your children need to know that you will no longer live together as a couple and there will be two homes, both of which will be filled with love for the children.

You're Separating as a Couple, but You Still Love Your Children and Are Their Parents.

Children may often internalize negative occurrences in the family, as their personal fault. That is why it is important to clearly explain and make sure they understand that you're getting a divorce because of yourselves and not because of something they did. Nobody is exiting their lives, and their parents are still going to love them and take care of them as much as they did before.

You and Your Ex-Partner My Not Be Together, but Will Remain on Good Terms.

When possible, it's best to keep everything civilized and talk to your children together, without blaming one another. This can be very difficult to do, especially if you're angry, but remember that there are some things in a couple's private life, which children don't need to know.

There Will Be Changes in Their Lives, but They Will Still Spend Time with Both Their Parents.

Children may often feel guilty for wanting to stay with mom, while leaving dad behind. It will be easier on your children, if you guide them away from that guilt, by making extra efforts to spend time with them. Perhaps you could take them to school or pick them up every day, or maybe you could have dinner at your house once or twice a week. The idea is to pick an activity that fits into their schedules naturally, and yet means spending more time with you.

Do Not Use Your Children as a Means of Blackmail.

“See what you’re doing to this family! How much pain you’re causing your children!”, this is the kind of comment you need to avoid. If the conversation starts to become too emotional for you to handle, you need to stop and step back to regain some calm. When talking to your children about divorce, you need to be their safe harbour. You and your ex are the adults that help them cope with the sadness they’re feeling.

It may take some time for your children to process that their parents are separating and they will be hurting in the meantime. No matter what age the children may be, they will always have a hard time with this change and it is up to you to help them.

Reactions to Expect

Divorce is a big change in the lives of all the family members, but can be especially overwhelming to children. Even if your children are very aware of the problems in the family and have asked you to dissolve the relationship, they may still experience or vocalize some of the reactions described below. By being prepared to empathize and help them, you are setting the ground for their healthy adaptation to the new circumstances.

Did I Do Something Wrong?

It’s not uncommon for children to believe they’re guilty of their parents’ divorce, because they have misbehaved. It’s important to let know that this is not the case. Even if your children don’t say it out loud, make sure this concern is thoroughly addressed and your children know that the separation is in no way their fault.

You’re Separating from Me as Well?

Although children may not say these exact words, it is likely that this is going to be one of their concerns. Separation means that “mommy and daddy are no longer together, but they will stay your parents forever”. Actually, being a parent or a child is something that you’ll never stop being, so make sure you tell your children your bond is forever.

Acting Out in School.

Acting out in school is usually a cry for help. Children are too young and inexperienced to deal with their feelings of grief, and need special attention from adults. Never forget to let your

child's teacher know what is going on in your home. Your child is hurting and needs understanding, not more punishment.

Being Extremely Quiet and Secretive.

Some children tend to internalize everything, especially pain. If your child seems overly content with your divorce, try observing their behaviour at school or at home and talk to them. Let them express their feelings about it.

The Fantasy That "They Will Get Back Together Someday".

For some time after the separation, your children may keep alive the fantasy that mom and dad will get back together. Consequentially, their reactions may not be too positive or understanding, when one of the parents resumes dating.

Remember that your children may need some time to adjust to the news of their parents separating. It is important to be prepared for the many questions and outbursts, and approach the matter with patience. Children tend to be angry as well, and may try to stop you from dating. Remember to focus on being supportive of your child and know that he or she will accept the new reality in time.

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