



How To Tell Your Children You Are Getting A Divorce

My Baba 7 June, 2021 Expert, Parenting, Kids

Are you wondering how to handle the potentially tricky conversations around children and divorce? How you might all cope with the challenging days and months ahead? We enlist the help of child consultant and a mediator Bill Hewlett from *The Divorce Surgery* who reveal all.

Children and divorce

It is of course important to keep children informed when parents decide to separate or divorce. There is a lot of research that supports the idea the children like to be informed about what is happening so that they can begin to work out how they are going to adapt to their new way of living. "Will I still go to the same school; will I have my own bedroom etc?"

Importance of keeping children informed

Children also like to have a voice about how they feel in the context of their parents' separation. Child inclusive mediation is sometimes useful, as it can provide parents with important insights to help them to be mindful of the children's unique perspectives as they navigate their way through this time of change.

Tone of voice and body language

The words that parents use are extremely important as they help children to begin to understand what they have, no doubt, been wondering about for some time. We use words to impart information to children so that they can begin the process of orienting themselves to how their new family is going to look. What is very often underappreciated though, is the fact that humans are far more influenced by context than they are by content, which means that even though the words are important, the apparent state of mind of each parent is far more so. Only 10% of what the child gleanes are from the words their parents use; 90% is from their tone of voice and body language. Imagine the confusing mixed messages the child will experience as they watch their parents deliver this information, whilst mum is looking heartbroken and close to tears and dad is looking positive and enthusiastic.

The changing shape of your family

It is therefore very important that the parents are helped to come to a point where they can talk to their children about the new upcoming shape of the family in ways that are genuinely and compellingly reassuring. They will need to communicate a sense, when they are talking to their children, that they are both mutually committed and looking forward to the new life that is to come.

This is not necessarily as hard as it sounds. Of course, rawness, grief and loss will play a big part in the parents' readiness to speak to their children and I would suggest that they put off this conversation with the children until they have achieved some degree of mutual equilibrium. Professional assistance might be useful to assist the parents to move from a position of anger, upset and possibly blame, to one of acceptance and accommodation of the fact that the family is going to take on a new shape.

It can be useful for separating parents to begin to consider that they may have been let down by a relationship that has failed them, rather than holding each other responsible. It is entirely natural when something awful has happened to us, that we come to the very easy and, what seems at the time correct, conclusion that things haven't worked out due to the poor character of the other person. But is it not possible that it's actually their relationship that has let the parents down by managing their differences badly, could it be that their relationship effectively dropped the ball, preventing them from feeling close and cared for by each other, just when times got tough and they needed it most?

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When it comes to children and divorce, a child will view this experience as much more than just an event in their life, but as something that defines them. It will tell them who they are and how much they matter, it will set within them an unconscious template as to how they should expect people to treat them for the rest of their lives. Children work out who they are by analysing their parents' responses to their behaviour, their logic is - 'if you look at me with interest, I will assume I'm interesting, if you look at me with love, I will assume I'm lovable'. Obviously, at a time of tumultuous uncertainty like this, their antennae will be particularly tuning in to gauge their parent's capacity to be mindful of how they, the children, might be feeling.

The child will be wondering: 'Can you still see me even when you are going through something traumatic yourself, or will I have to take a back seat until you regain your capacity to be mindfully aware of me?' 'Will you dad, be able to resist the temptation to make mum feel even more guilty than she already does, so that she can give me the unique care that only she can provide?' Will you mum, be able to help dad to feel less angry, so that he can give me that unique sense of reassurance that only he can give so that I can feel safe during this time of uncertainty?

The guiding philosophy is simple, although understandably sometimes hard to apply: If the parents are able to look after each other during this difficult time, they will automatically be looking after their child. This, of course, is not easy when one or both parents are reeling from the grief and loss that routinely accompanies the breakdown of a significant relationship, but stepping up and nourishing the other parent is not only good for the mental health of the recipient and of course the children, but also good for the giver as well.

Talking to the children about the new shape of the family

When tackling children and divorce, it's a good idea to frame your separation in language that implies positive and optimistic change in the future. In other words, to create a narrative that frames the new post-separation parenting alliance as nothing more than a reshaped and revised version of the family. Sometimes family relationships need to undergo necessary and beneficial renewal mechanisms to ensure that they meet the fluid and ever-changing needs of the people they are responsible for. Just because the parent's relationship needs to be adjusted and updated from time to time in order to ensure they can continue to parent as well as they can, doesn't mean they are bad people.

9 things to say to your children during a divorce

- 'We have been thinking about how to make sure that you all have the best time possible when you are with us. We've noticed that when we make each other feel happy then that makes each of you feel happy too.'
- 'You've probably noticed that we haven't always been happy, we can tell this because of the questions you sometimes ask us, for example, sometimes you tell us to stop arguing, or you ask if we're getting a divorce, or whether one of us will leave the house one day and not come back.'
- 'We know that we've argued in front of you and we want to do less of that.'
- 'We like each other in a different way from how we used to and this means there are some changes we would like to make that will make us happier with each other and then we can do a better job of being your parents.'
- 'So, we're going to change a few things around to make sure that as your parents, we are happier, and whenever you need us to. The changes we want to make are going to help that because they are going to allow us to be happier within ourselves.'
- 'The changes we're going to make are going to include which houses we're both going to be living in. We thought that it would be good to sometimes just be with one of you so we can chat without your brothers and sisters being around. There will also be times when you are all together when you're with each of us.'
- 'We know this is a good idea because it will make us both feel happier, so you will each get more of our attention at bedtime/we will both be at home more than we have been.'
- 'The new way that we're going to be living is going to be better for all of us. It's going to be really exciting and we're both looking forward to it. We will need your help to tell us how we should arrange things just how you like them.'
- 'We both want to make sure that we can talk to each other about how we think you are feeling in a way that makes you all feel comfortable and that we like talking to each other.'

This conversation with the children, if managed carefully and with compassionate mutual support, could be a defining moment that sets you both up with a collaborative and cooperative post-separation parenting alliance that will shield your children from the distress that conventionally accompanies the breakdown of a relationship. You may need some help to get there, but the benefits to you and your children are so endless that they are almost impossible to quantify.

It can be so hard for couples to have these conversations around children and divorce. Starting with the right mindset is so important. For many co-parents, sharing the same co-parenting expert and the same lawyer to give them the expertise they need can be invaluable, such as the Livings Apart Parenting Together service offered at [The Divorce Surgery](#). Whatever route you take, be sure to keep those channels of communication open.

Article by [Bill Hewlett](#), [The Divorce Surgery](#).

Bill Hewlett has worked for 20 years as a child consultant and a mediator and has managed and supervised the clinical practice of mediators across six Family Relationship Centres in Sydney, Australia. In response to the current challenges of the UK family law system, Bill has developed an innovative and effective model of practice for working with parents who are in conflict with each other. Bill now works in partnership with the Divorce Surgery and Living Apart Parenting Together.

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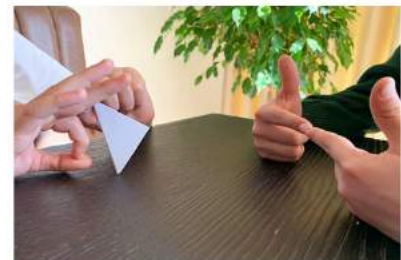
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