

13 Tips for Talking with Your Minor Children about Your Separation and Divorce

by Carol R. Hughes, Ph.D., LMFT

www.DivorcePeacemaking.com

The following tips will help you prepare to talk with your children about your separation and divorce. You care about doing the best you can for your children because you are reading this article. Give yourself permission not to be perfect. No one is. This is a stressful time for all of you. Remember to keep taking slow, deep breaths --- you and your children will get through this difficult time.

1. Agree on a time when you both can be present to talk with your children together. Siblings need the support they can provide each other. Divorce is a major life crisis for all family members. Treat it as such. Ideally, it is best to share the news with your children when they have adequate time to absorb what you will be telling them, for example, when they do not have to go back to school in a day or two after hearing the news.

2. Plan your presentation to your children in advance. Make some notes about what you plan to say and review them to be familiar with what you intend to say. Anticipate what they may say to you. You can have the notes in front of you if you wish and say, "We have made some notes because what we are going to be talking about is very important for all of us, and we don't want to forget anything." Remember that your children will likely be in emotional shock after you tell them your intentions to end your marriage, and they will not be able to absorb everything you say this first time. Be prepared to have the same conversation with them numerous times. Their shock and grieving will interfere with them being able to take in all you are sharing.

3. First, tell your children that you love them very much, that you will always love them and always be their parents. Assure them that they will continue to have both parents' emotional support and love in the newly restructured family.

4. Tell them that the two of you have decided not to be married anymore and live in different homes because you have adult problems between you that you have tried to solve but haven't been able to. Avoid using the word "divorce" because it is laden with negative connotations. Assure your children that this is **NOT THEIR FAULT**. Children often automatically assume it **IS** their fault.

5. Avoid saying that you don't love each other anymore. Children then think that their parents could also stop loving them one day, which could unsettle them and the stable foundation of having two loving parents.

6. Avoid blaming each other. Now is the time for the two of you to have a united front with your children. Remember that this news will shatter their view of their family as they have known it. Blaming each other puts them in the middle of your pain and conflict, causes them to experience divided loyalty, feel that they need to choose sides, and feel guilty for loving both of you. Children often report that they hated being put in this position and feeling that each parent attempted to form an alliance with them against the other parent.

7. Next, tell them what is going to remain the same. Tell them that you are all still family, that you will always be their parents, and that you will always love them. Tell them you intend to be friendly so that you can both attend their activities and family gatherings and not create tension for them, for other family members, or their friends. Tell them if one of you intends to stay in the family home if you know this. Assure them that they will be remaining in their same schools, same activities, etc., if this is true. If you don't yet know all that will remain the same, it is ok to tell them that. Assure them that you will tell them when you do know more about what will stay the same.

8. Next, tell them what is not going to remain the same. Tell them if you both will be moving into new homes and, at the appropriate time, that they can be involved in seeing the new homes or looking for them with you after you have narrowed your choices down to two options. It's important to be neutral and factual. Resist being a victim or a martyr. It will only make them feel guilty.

9. If they ask you a question you don't know the answer to yet, for example, "Will we stay in this house?" it's ok to tell them you don't know the answer to that question, and when you do, you will tell them.

10. Remember that you are still their parents. It is your job to put their feelings above yours and provide them with the support they need to hear, feel, and understand what you share with them. Acknowledge that you realize the announcement is a shock and that their feelings (anger, sadness, grief, shock, etc.) are ok. Focus on and be empathetic with THEIR feelings. Don't talk about YOUR feelings, e.g., how you haven't been happy for years, how you deserve to be happy, etc. Having just received such painful news, they will be unable to express their happiness for you, and it is unreasonable for you to expect them to do so. Remember, what you are telling them is rocking their familial foundation and rewriting their family history. They are losing their "family nest."

11. Tell them that you still believe in family and that you hope they will too. Tell them that you don't expect them to take care of you emotionally or physically. That is your job, not theirs.

12. Avoid telling them that you stayed together or delayed restructuring your family because of them. This will make them feel guilty for your unhappy marriage. Depending on their ages, they may already be recalling their childhood memories and wondering: "What was real and what wasn't real? Were you really happy on those family vacations?" Divorce destabilizes the family system and inevitably shakes every family member's perception of their past, present, and future.

13. Assure them that this will be a process for all of you to move through, at your own pace and in your own way. Assure them that you will always love them and always be there for them in whatever ways will be most helpful to them. You want them to know that they aren't alone, so they don't become isolated and depressed. Encourage them to speak with a counselor or youth pastor about their feelings. Tell them you intend to speak with a counselor

because you have learned that the end of a marriage is a major life stressor for all family members and is second only to the death of a loved one. Assure them that you will all get through this together.

Original material © 2021 Carol R. Hughes, Ph.D., LMFT

Carol R. Hughes, Ph.D., LMFT, holds her doctoral degree in Clinical Psychology and her master's degree in Counseling Psychology, achieving both summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa honors. She is also a two-time Fulbright Scholar. In private practice in Laguna Hills, CA, since 1983, Dr. Hughes is a respected expert and sought-after speaker on the effects of divorce on children. She is a board-certified clinical hypnotherapist, an EMDR therapist, and a former professor of Human Services at Saddleback College.

In 2003, she became one of the founding members of Collaborative Divorce Solutions of Orange County. She is a co-founder of and trainer for the Collaborative Divorce Education Institute in Orange County, CA, a non-profit organization whose mission is to educate the public about peaceful options for divorce and provide quality training for collaborative divorce professionals.

She frequently trains and mentors collaborative practitioners and has appeared on the Time Warner Public television series "How to Get a Divorce." Carol is a frequent presenter at the International Academy of Collaborative Professionals, the Association of Family Conciliation Courts, and California's annual statewide conferences for collaborative professionals. In 2011, Carol was honored with the Eureka Award, which recognizes those who have made significant contributions and demonstrated an abiding dedication to establishing and sustaining Collaborative Practice in California.

She is the co-author of the book *Home Will Never Be the Same Again: A Guide for Adult Children of Gray Divorce*. For a complete listing of her collaborative practice training and teaching workshops, please visit www.CollaborativePractice.com, the International Academy of Collaborative Professionals website, and click on the "Locate a Collaborative Professional near you" link. In addition, please visit her website at www.DivorcePeacemaking.com.