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ATTORNEYS AT LAW

## DIVORCE: TELLING THE KIDS

Making the decision to divorce is hard for everyone, but possibly hardest on the children. How you tell them, and when, is important.

This is one time when it is critical that you and your spouse put aside your differences and work together.

Your divorce may come as a total surprise to your children, or they may have been expecting it. It depends a great deal on the level of conflict during the marriage. Regardless of whether your children have “seen it coming,” their reactions may run the gamut from calm acceptance to tears to anger to denial to hysteria. You need to be prepared to deal with any and all of these reactions.

1. It is very important that you tell your children together. You are both parents of the children; neither of you should be excused from this difficult discussion—even if the decision to divorce was not mutual.
2. Don't tell the children you're “thinking about” splitting up. This will upset them and prompt them to try to “fix things.” Tell them only when the decision has been made.
3. Don't ask the children for their opinion about your decision. This will put them in the middle. An adult decision like this needs to be made by the adults.
4. Don't tell the children too far in advance of the separation. Wait until a day or two before the actual separation. Try to tell them on a day when they don't have school; if you can't, keep them out of school that day. They need time to process this radical change in their lives and to react.
5. Decide ahead of time exactly what you're going to tell the children, then stick to the plan. Don't surprise your spouse by saying things that aren't in the script. Rehearse the conversation ahead of time.
6. Anticipate the questions your children are likely to ask, and have answers ready.
7. Keep the conversation short and to the point.
8. Don't editorialize. The best explanation is a simple, “Things haven't worked out the way we planned and we think it's best that we no longer live together.” Answer their questions, but remember that some things they don't need to know. Emphasize that you believe that the decision is best for the entire family. DO NOT say, “We don't love each other any more,” because this may raise fears that you will also stop loving the children. And under no circumstances should you make one parent the “bad guy,” as in, “Your mom doesn't love me any more and has asked me to leave,” or “Your dad has met someone he loves more than me.”
9. Reassure your children that you still love them. This is a terrible time for you, but it's worse for your children. They need to be comforted and reassured that both parents still love them, that even though you will not be husband and wife, you will still be Mom and Dad.
10. Try to let them know where they will live and when they'll see the parent who is moving out. Children often fear abandonment, and when one parent moves out these fears can be worsened. The children may have some strong feelings about which parent they want to live with, but now is not the time to get into that. Wait until things calm down to have that conversation.

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