

# Getting Divorced?

## What to Tell your Spouse Before You Tell the Kids!

By Rosalind Sedacca, CCT

Ever go on a vacation without making plans in advance? The consequences are usually disastrous. If you fail to plan ahead regarding newspaper and mail delivery, feeding your pets or watering the plants, knowing where your destination is and reserving your accommodations, your vacation is likely to be filled with disappointment, frustration and even heartache.

What about preparing your children for your pending divorce? Do you have a plan – or are you going to wing it without any prior thought? For children, divorce is a monumental life experience for which they have no preparation. The very foundation of their security – their love for Mom and Dad – is being thrown into turmoil. Everything they knew and accepted as part of routine daily life is going to be affected in one way or another. They don't know what to expect and have little source of comfort other than their parents who are announcing the devastating news.

How can you help your children through this process? First, sit down face to face and talk to your children's other parent, as if their lives depended on it. Regardless of your involvement with attorneys or other legal resources, this should be a conversation between two parents who love their children and want the best outcome for them.

Agree to set aside the emotional drama of your feelings for one another at this time ... the hurt, anger, resentment, jealousy, competition, frustration, regret ... and focus on just one issue: *How will we tell our children about the divorce?*

### **1. Put yourselves in your children's shoes.**

Picture each of your children and talk to each other about how each child is likely to feel and react to the news. Put yourselves in their shoes and feel their emotions with deep compassion. You know your children. Discuss their ages and personalities. Are they likely to blame themselves ... erupt in anger ... beg you to stay together ... want to run away and hide? Find a place of agreement and be prepared with the most comforting words and reassurances that will resonate with each child.

### **2. Remind them they are not at fault.**

Many children feel responsible in some way for their parent's relationship problems and divorce. They need reassurance, again and again, that the problem is not about them – even if you've been fighting about parenting issues. Assure them it's not their behavior that caused your conflict – and there is nothing they can do to make things different. You can say something like, "Mom and Dad have been having problems. We don't agree

about certain key issues and that creates conflict. So we are going to make some changes, but none of this is your fault and never was.”

### **3. Reassure them that Mom and Dad will always be their parents.**

Your children need to understand two things at this time. Mom and Dad will always love them – and will always be their parents. It is important to emphasize that no matter what changes occur over the weeks, months and years ahead, Mom and Dad will still always be their real parents and no one else will replace them. Tell them you both will always be there for them, no matter where you live or how things should change.

You can say, “No matter what happens, no matter what changes occur, one thing is for certain. Mom and Dad will always love you. That will never change. Regardless of where we live, what we do and how old you get. You can count on that. And don’t ever forget it.” Make sure you live up to that in the arrangements you will be making.

### **4. Focus on change, not on blame.**

Divorce is a scary word. It is wise at this time to talk to your children about change as a natural part of life. “Everything in life keeps changing. You grow bigger, stronger and smarter every year. The seasons change. You change grades and schools as you get older. Change means things will be different in some ways. It doesn’t mean things will be bad. Often change can make things better, and that’s what Mom and Dad want to do.”

Explain that it can take time for us to get used to changes, like starting a new grade with a new teacher. Other times change gives us a chance to do things in a new and better way, like trying a new sport or a hobby you grow to love.

Mention that the changes in our family are not about who’s *right or wrong* or who’s *good or bad*. “Mom and Dad both tried their best to resolve our problems. The old way didn’t work for us and now we will be trying a new way for our family to live so there’s more peace, calmness and happiness for us all. Let’s think about how we can see the changes ahead as a new adventure -- a brand new chapter in our lives. It may not only be different – it may be better!”

### **5. Be confident and consistent.**

Children are often frightened when faced with new experiences – and divorce is a monumental challenge for them to grasp. Keep reminding your children that everything will be okay. “Mom and Dad are working on all the details so you don’t have to worry about anything because Mom and Dad have it all under control.”

This isn’t the time to go into a lot of specifics. You may not have many answers yourselves. Keep the message very generic. “We’ll have new ways of doing some things ... some new responsibilities ... some differences in our schedules. But life will go on. We will get used to the differences. Some of them we may even prefer. And after a while,

we'll look back and say, life is different than it used to be, but it's all okay. Mom and Dad are okay, you're all okay, our family is okay and we still love each other. And that's most important of all!"

Ideally both Mom and Dad should tell the children together and agree in advance about the messages you are conveying. If you're having the conversation alone, you must stay neutral and not talk disrespectfully about the other parent that your children still love. Focus on your children's feelings and reactions. Respond compassionately in the best way you can.

These core messages are the foundation your children will depend on when they are feeling frightened, sad or insecure. Repeat them often in your own words and your own style. You'll be rewarded in countless ways as you and your children encounter and overcome the challenges of life after divorce.

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Rosalind Sedacca, CCT is the author of *How Do I Tell the Kids about the Divorce? A Create-a-Storybook™ Guide to Preparing Your Children -- with Love!* Acclaimed by divorce professionals, the book provides fill-in-the-blank templates that guide parents in creating a family storybook with personal photographs as an ideal way to break the news. For more details, a free ezine, articles, coaching and other resources visit <http://www.childcentereddivorce.com>.

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