

# HOW TO TALK TO CHILDREN ABOUT DIVORCE

BY CATHERINE BECHTEL  
PARTNER



**Talk with your children together** – if at all possible. Children need to feel that they are supported by both parents during this very difficult time. Obviously if there are issues of violence between parents this will not be possible. In most other circumstances, it is possible to meet together as a family, or to at least coordinate the conversation so that you each give a similar version of what will happen and what the children can expect in the coming weeks.

**Keep it Simple:** Children do not need all of the details about what led to the divorce. Tailor the answers to your child's age and development. Particularly very young children will need to hear only a basic explanation. The information should focus on the children's needs. A basic message should include:

- The parents have decided to live apart
- You both still love them
- When changes will begin to happen
- Where Mom and Dad will be living
- When the children will see each parent (this should be very specific)

**Keep it Calm:** It helps no one to have a fight in front of the children when you are delivering this important news. Fighting in front of your children will cause confusion and worry about what will happen to them. Don't burden your children with adult emotions that they won't and can't understand. Children often internalize your sadness, fear, anxiety and anger as something they have caused. It also puts them in the position of feeling like they have to care for you instead of the other way around. Children need you to be in control of your emotions so you can offer them the security they need. No matter your relationship with your spouse, your children have unconditional love for the other parent.

**Plan a Schedule:** Keep in mind that kids need two parents. This can be emotionally difficult for both child and parent when talking about a visitation schedule. Work out in advance with the other parent (or your lawyer or mediator) what the temporary schedule will be. Communicating a clear expectation about when the children will see each of you will relieve a lot of your child's worry and fear. Children need to understand what is going to happen.

**Show Respect:** Answer your children's questions honestly, but without the commentary. Show respect for the other parent. Do not criticize, condemn, blame or call names. Spilling too much of your own emotion about your spouse (even if its justified) will make your children feel like they have to choose between you. This behavior is also not helpful in the event you are in a custody or visitation proceeding at Court. Parents who are willing to share the children often do better in the Court process.