

Chapter Twelve

WHAT ABOUT THE CHILDREN?

Should we tell our children?

Imagine that many of your coworkers are getting laid off from work, and you know that more layoffs are coming. Imagine that every few months, with each round of cuts moving closer and closer, you watch another friend and member of your department sadly empty out his or her desk. The fear and uncertainty of your waiting to be axed can be worse than the knowing, and the stress of waiting for the other shoe to fall can be excruciating. But when you know that something is definite, you can step up to the plate, show your strength of character and what you are made of, and can get informed, make plans and take action.

Newsflash: Your kids know something is up, and that mom and dad aren't getting along. It is not usually normal for mom and dad to never sleep together, especially if they don't ever show affection to each other, or for mom to be crying all the time, or to see increasingly acrimonious fights. Your children have friends whose parents put their kids through horrible divorces. Your children's imaginations can create scenarios far worse than reality. They fear that they may never see one of you anymore, that one of you won't be there for them anymore, that they are not loved anymore, that your fighting is all their fault and that Santa may not come on Christmas Day.

Alleviate the tension and anxiety by coming out and letting your children know you will be forming a two-home family, and that they will become two-home children.

How and what should we tell our children?

Tell them together. Keep it simple and brief. Leave the adult issues out of it. Would you let your children watch an X-rated movie? Give them the G-rated version of events. That's all they need.

Tell them the decision to separate and divorce is mutual. Tell your children it is not the fault of one or the other of you, that you and your spouse simply cannot continue to live together, and that they are not to blame. It is important for your children to understand that your separation and divorce is not their fault.

Tell them they will have two homes, and that they will still see each of you. Tell them you will do some things all together as a family on occasion, but that does not mean you and your spouse will be getting back together. Tell them you love them very much, that you will always love them very much and that nothing could *ever* change that. Tell them you will both be at their games and school events, and will cooperate in taking them to those events, regardless of which home they will be at on that day.

When should we tell our children?

Don't wait until the boxes are piled up in the hallway. On the other hand, don't tell them if nothing is going to happen for awhile. Tell them sometime in between – when something is set to change in the near future. Give them time to process the change before it's a done deal. If they're watching you check out schools, daycare centers and apartments in a new town, you've waited too long.

What should we *not* tell our children?

Don't tell them how stressed, sad, hurt, scared and angry you are. It is *not* a child's job to absorb an adult's pain and frustration. Don't tell them how bad a person or parent your spouse is. It *is* a child's job to love each parent, warts and all. Don't tell them all about how evil your spouse's paramour is.

Don't tell them you can't afford your home any more because of your spouse. Don't tell them you are worried about having enough money.

Don't tell them that your spouse doesn't love them or want to see them anymore. Don't tell them your spouse is a threat to them unless that is *absolutely* true, and you obtain counseling for them to process that truth. Don't tell them about judges, lawyers and court proceedings. It's your job as a parent to insulate them from the negativity your divorce is creating, and to help them cope with the fallout of the restructuring of the family. They won't read self-help books. You can, and should.

Will news of the impending separation and divorce affect our children of different ages in different ways?

Yes. Very young children may simply need to know that there is a plan, and that everything will be all right. They don't necessarily need to know all the details of who's going to refinance the former marital home, or what the custodial schedule will look like. The average four year old doesn't even *know* what a "weekend" *is*, let alone the concept of alternate weekends. Small children just need to know that they'll still see mom and dad all the time. Each morning they may only need to know what they'll be doing that day, and when they go to bed, after talking at least on the phone with their other parent to say goodnight, what they'll be doing after they wake up.

Older children will want reassurance that their lives will not be disrupted too much, and that their needs will be taken care of. They may insist that nothing in their lives should change. That may not, however, be entirely possible.

If you *are* going to disrupt your children's lives by moving them out of their schools or away from their friends, show them how to properly grieve in going through the process of loss. Be an example to them of how to look forward with optimism, because curveballs and change are a part of life. Make them understand that if they have to move into a smaller home, the brick and mortar do not define their self worth.

Teach them gently that it is important for them to learn how to move through the hard changes. They don't have to "keep a stiff upper lip." It is healthy and necessary for them to feel an appropriate level of pain. Just as you must, your children must experience and move through that pain. If they just suppress or repress their anxiety and fear, they will simply develop more and greater problems later on.

What actions are the most hurtful to our children?

Judges, divorce lawyers, and family therapists see the fallout when one parent acts in ways that are harmful to children. Parents who intentionally or unintentionally harm their children often do so because of significant untreated mental health or substance abuse issues. A parent may also be unable to cope because he or she is overwhelmed with the burdens of caring for children, while also working outside the home, with minimal or no help. Cultural issues may leave a parent feeling trapped in an unhealthy marriage, or unable to stand up for himself or herself and the children during a separation. A parent may be codependent upon, or the victim of, an abusive spouse, and not yet emotionally healthy or strong enough to leave his or her abuser.

A parent may also suffer from milder mental health problems, such as not being able to control his or her anger towards an unfaithful spouse. A parent unable to deal with the offending spouse in a healthy manner may act in ways that seem erratic, excessively selfish or downright mean. The family may also not even realize a parent has a problem such as depression, bipolar disorder or borderline personality disorder, which problems can cause that person to act in harmful or overly controlling ways.

Parents caught up in their own dramas need to understand and take the following to heart:

Children can become emotionally damaged by watching a parent spend a lot of time crying on the phone to friends and family, or by watching him or her engage in unnecessary theatrics. Children can become emotionally damaged when a parent's new social life impacts their care.

Children can become emotionally damaged by watching one parent damage their other parent's property out of anger or spite. Children can become emotionally damaged when one parent badmouths their other parent, and their other parent's paramour, to them and to everyone else.

Children can become emotionally damaged if they are constantly hearing one parent complain that their other parent is not sending enough money. Children can become emotionally damaged when they see a parent keep track of how much money is spent on them when they are with that parent, as if that parent is deciding just how much they are worth.

Children can become emotionally damaged if they are told to act as spies, and to report on their other parent's actions. Children can become

emotionally damaged if they are asked to relay messages back and forth about support and visitation.

Children can become emotionally damaged when one parent tries to cut their other parent out of their lives, when that parent poses no threat to them. Children can become emotionally damaged when one parent won't let them talk, unmonitored and frequently, to their other parent on the telephone.

Children can become emotionally damaged when one parent calls the police all the time when their non-violent, non-threatening other parent merely comes by the school, extracurricular activities or former marital home to see them. Children can become emotionally damaged when they see one parent bar their other parent from the former marital home just after the initial separation, without good cause.

Children can become emotionally damaged when a parent *should* call the police because they are being physically abused, and does not. Children can become emotionally damaged when a parent tells a child to lie to the school or doctor or else the *children* will be "putting mommy or daddy in jail," instead of clarifying that mommy or daddy put his or her *own* self into jail for improper conduct.

Children can become emotionally damaged when a parent tolerates their other parent's emotional abuse of them, and remains silent. Children can become emotionally damaged when a parent accepts abuse as a matter of course, thereby teaching his or her children that it is acceptable to live with abuse.

Children can become emotionally damaged when their parents jockey to get to the school or daycare center first to pick them up, just so their other parent can't. Children can become emotionally damaged when their parents fight over enrolling them in August in different school

districts, because their parents think they're fighting over some perceived advantage in the custody hearing they want to have.

Children can become emotionally damaged when a parent moves out, and they do not see that parent's new place, no matter how humble. They need to know where that parent is, and that he or she is all right. Children can become emotionally damaged when they need to spend extra time with the parent who just moved out to be reassured that parent is still there for them, and the other parent won't let them, out of fear of setting a custodial timesharing precedent.

Children can become emotionally damaged when they are forced to spend time with a parent's new love interest, when they are not ready to have that person in their lives, or don't like that person. Children can become emotionally damaged when they see their parent prefer to spend time with that new interest instead of with them, or if that person takes time away from their time with their parent.

Children can become emotionally damaged when a parent moves away with them, far from the other parent, and they no longer see the other parent on a regular basis. Children can become emotionally damaged when a parent moves away from them, making them feel rejected and abandoned. They will always be missing someone.

Children can become emotionally damaged when a parent tries to tell them what they should "tell the judge" at the upcoming custody hearing. Children can become emotionally damaged when their parents tell them all about and involve them in court proceedings. Children can become emotionally damaged when their parents try to get them to choose between them.

Children can become emotionally damaged when a parent constantly promises to pick them up on a certain day at a certain time, and doesn't

show up or is always late. Children can become emotionally damaged when their parents fight during and about each visitation exchange.

Children can become emotionally damaged when conflict swirls around special holidays and birthdays. Children can become emotionally damaged when their parents cause public scenes at their sporting, school and other special events.

Children can become emotionally damaged when a parent won't take them to the activities they want to participate in, because the other parent set up the activities. Children can become emotionally damaged when a parent won't let them take the clothing or toys purchased for them to their other parent's home so they can have them there also.

Children can become emotionally damaged when you try to sling mud at each other in a custody case, hoping some of it will stick. The reality is that judges want to hear the positive of what you can each offer your children, and not the negatives. That mud usually winds up splashing right back onto the person who threw it.

Children can become emotionally damaged when they see you hurt each other.

Children caught in the crossfire may become traumatized, and may be reduced to little puddles of anxiety. Or they may not always show on the outside just how much damage you are doing to them - at least maybe not right away. They may even deny to themselves the pain they are feeling. That suppressed pain, fear and anger will remain with them, however, and will affect them down the road.

Children who do not receive the appropriate help to process what they are being put through will act out their stresses later on in ways destructive to themselves, to their futures, to their adult relationships and to society. That will be the legacy of your divorce.

Is it sometimes necessary to protect children from a parent?

It is wrong to alienate children from a parent unless that parent is abusive *to the children* and is not addressing that problem. If a parent is abusive *to the other parent*, the victim must learn, through therapy, to set appropriate limits and boundaries with the abuser, and must teach the children to set those same limits. However, if the limits are conveyed to the abuser and are then crossed, it may become appropriate at that time in some cases to redefine the relationship.

If a parent is suffering from a significant untreated mental health problem, his or her children of any age could benefit from therapy to learn to understand that problem. They will need to learn to set appropriate limits to avoid being victimized, and to allay their fears that they will suffer the same fate someday. It may be necessary, in extreme cases, to set limits through protective court orders requiring restrictions on visitation, or by requiring visitation to be supervised.

If a parent is suffering from a significant untreated substance abuse problem, his or her children should also receive professional help, so they can avoid becoming sympathetic enablers, especially if that was the behavior modeled by their other parent. It would also be advisable to become familiar with the documented problems faced by children of substance abusers, (including untreated "dry drunks" who are still alcoholics even though not drinking), so as to learn to spot and help those children overcome the other negative coping behaviors they may develop.

Children of substance abusers may have to grow up just a bit faster than children not exposed to such problems, so they can learn how to spot signs of a parent's substance abuse when in that parent's care. They should be given and learn to use a cell phone, so they can call for help if their safety is put in jeopardy. Voluntary or court-ordered restrictions on visitation, or supervised visitation, may also be appropriate.

If your spouse is engaging in any of the above behaviors, you must find the financial resources and time to take whatever action is necessary to save your children. If you don't help them, you may be just as guilty of abusing them as is your spouse. Don't teach them to accept and live with unacceptable behavior.

And if *you* are engaging in these behaviors yourself, you must get professional help so you can cope, get on track and not ruin your children's futures even further.

How can we help our children?

Be there for them. Let them cry. Don't relax all oversight in a misguided guilt-driven belief that they can't maintain their normal responsibilities, but cut them some slack once in a while.

Have them attend at least one or two sessions with a competent mental health practitioner specializing in family counseling and the treatment of children. Keep them in counseling if necessary. Let the school guidance counselor know what's going on. See if the school has a support group for kids whose parents are divorcing.

Do something special for them every now and then. Spend time with them. Let them have some fun. Have some fun with them. Laugh once in awhile.

Most importantly, never let them see, hear or know about you fighting with your spouse. Don't create a tempest and expect your children to just calmly sail through it.

Work out your differences outside of court.



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