



Explaining Divorce to Children

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Children thrive on routine and balance in their lives. Even though they may not have the verbal ability to express their feelings, they are aware of the emotional climate in their homes, sensing if there is sadness and discontent. Nothing is more distressing to youngsters than a change they do not understand. Because parents generally view divorce as an adult matter, “most children are inadequately informed by their parents about the separation and divorce” (Kelly & Emery, 2003, p. 353).

In one study of parent-child communications about divorce, 23 percent of children said no one talked to them about the divorce, and 45 percent said they had been given abrupt one- or two-line explanations (“Your dad is leaving”). Only 5 percent said they had been fully informed and encouraged to ask questions (Dunn, Davies, O’Connor, & Sturgess, 2001 as cited in Kelly & Emery, 2003, p. 353).

Parents often say that they “did not know what was happening themselves, so did not know what to tell their children. Children ... felt that they did not know how to ask for information that they felt they needed” (Robinson, Butler, Scanlan, Douglas, & Murch, 2003, p. 78). While parents may be trying to protect their children, they risk increasing the “child’s confusion and uncertainty about the future” (Robinson, et al., p. 78). Children tend to adapt more easily when they have an idea about what is happening and have the support of those they love.

If divorce is imminent, researchers agree that it is best to tell the children right away. Not telling children from the beginning increases the chances that they will be told by the wrong person in the wrong way. The way in which divorce is discussed with children will influence their reaction. Difficult as it may be, it is usually best for the explanation to come from both parents. This approach lessens the chance of one parent blaming the other; it also dem-

onstrates that the parents can work together for the best interest of their children.

Parents might use words like the following in explaining their divorce to a young child:

- “Daddy and Mommy have decided not to live together in the same house.”
- “Daddy and Mommy will not be married anymore; we will be divorced. We are sorry this has to be the way, but Mommy and Daddy think this is best for everyone” (Grollman, 1969, p. 67).
- Avoid saying, “Daddy and Mommy don’t love one another anymore.” From birth, children hear that they are loved. If parents talk about not loving each other anymore, a child may fear that he or she will also lose the parents’ love if he or she misbehaves (Grollman, 1969, p. 68).

Parents should make it very clear to children that reconciliation is impossible. Children need to hear and understand that they cannot rescue or restore the marriage.

Possible Reactions of Children to Divorce

Children may exhibit a variety of emotional reactions to divorce. Common grief reactions include: denial and silence, regression, bodily distress, hostility and guilt, and panic and confusion.

Denial and Silence

In denial and silence, the child closes his eyes to the situation. He may appear to be unconcerned with the divorce because he is trying to defend himself against the awful loss by secretly pretending that it has not really happened. His indifference may mean that he has found the disruption too great to accept. Parents often misinterpret this reaction as acceptance of the situation.

Regression

Because of an inability to master the new anxiety, the child may return to earlier stages of development during regression. Some examples of these behaviors are: sucking their thumb, wetting the bed, speaking baby talk, or displaying other earlier behaviors. Children may complain a lot and insist on adult attention.

Bodily Distress

Bodily distress expresses itself in physical and behavioral complaints such as: “I have a stomachache!” or “My head hurts!” Bodily distress often results when the child becomes unsure of things that he has previously taken for granted, such as life, parental love, food, shelter, and protection.

Hostility and Guilt

Hostile reactions include angry acts and feelings that arise as the child tries to remove frustration through revenge. Children vent anger on others in an attempt to manage feelings of guilt.

Young children frequently have strong feelings of guilt because they believe that they are responsible for causing the loss. Preschool children sometimes believe they have supernatural powers. They may think that their fantasy desires have been magically granted. It is the parents’ responsibility to repeatedly assure them that they are not to blame.

Panic and Confusion

Panic and confusion often result when children are expected to adopt their parents’ differing values and lifestyles.

Letting Children Feel

Typically, children find the time period from the initial separation through the first couple of years to be quite stressful. Parents must permit children to feel their emotions, whatever they may be. Avoid the tendency to tell children, and especially boys, to “Be strong! Don’t cry!” Tears are a natural expression of sorrow. They are like a safety valve used to relieve emotion. Just as parents should not encourage the child to repress tears, they should not prod them to show unfelt sorrow (Grollman, 1969, p. 30).

The difference between a normal reaction and a distorted one is not in the symptom but in the intensity. It is best when parents can spot potential difficulties early. Signals for concern include: problems getting along with peers, learning difficulties, withdrawal, inconsolable crying, and sustained anger at parents, peers, or siblings.

By explaining divorce to children, parents signal a willingness to discuss children’s issues and concerns about the divorce. As the process evolves, children will have new questions and concerns. Each time, it will be easier to talk about these issues and as children get older, they will have a better understanding. By talking together, parents can provide comfort, assurance, and security.

References

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