



Explaining Divorce to Young Children

Share in small bites, don't place blame by Azmaira H. Maker, Ph.D.

Parents can struggle with explaining divorce to their young children. Naturally, parents worry about overwhelming their child and sometimes parents disagree on their approach and delivery of the explanation. Divorcing parents often ask professionals, "What should we say? How do we help our children understand?" Although there isn't one correct answer, there are some solid guidelines. Here are a few:

Children are unique and parents need to be mindful of each child's developmental stage, cognitive capacity, and emotional needs. Ideally, parents should adapt their explanations and conversations with their children according to their distinct developmental functioning and capacity. Although it is best to share the news at the same time for children close in age, if developmental differences exist, the discussion with each child may be slightly different, and this is appropriate.

Share in small bites. Adults sometimes believe that if they have a few long conversations with a child related to the divorce, the child will comprehend the issue. However, children process in bits and pieces—on the move, in and out of play, and in random moments. Hence, it is important to share the facts in small bites, and not overwhelm the child with too much information. Adults should create, expect, and respond to ongoing small dialogues throughout the transition. During these conversations, allow the child to immerse in play, fantasy, and imagination to work through their questions and feelings, so that they are not overwhelmed.

Use neutral and non-judgmental language. It's sometimes hard for adults to find words that clearly explain a big topic like divorce. Use words such as "changed," "disagreement," and "arguing." Although this is simple language, we need to gear our explanations to young children in developmentally appropriate and child-friendly ways. Storytelling and puppet play are excellent ways for adults to explore difficult feelings and questions with young children. Play and story-telling give children a new understanding and new ways to talk about their feelings without shame, blame, criticism, or guilt.

Don't blame the other parent. Using neutral language implies that the parent is careful to not blame, fault, or criticize the other parent in the process. If blame and fault are assigned to the other parent, it is likely to trigger confusion, anxiety, and even anger as the child is placed in a position of tug-of-war between the parents. Children need to continue to idealize both parents, and stay connected and attached to each parent in healthy ways. The more parents can facilitate this trust and attachment with themselves and the other parent, the better the child will adapt to this major life transition.

Be honest. Divorcing parents often ask, "How much should I share with my child?" Professionals usually encourage parents to be honest and use the words 'separate' and 'divorce.' Given the high rate of divorce in the U.S., it is very likely that your child has classmates who have been through this experience or your child knows other children of divorce. Therefore, if you avoid the words 'separate' and 'divorce' and don't explain what they mean, young children are more likely to be confused and anxious – as their imaginations are more powerful than the truth. Details about the divorce should only be shared in an age-appropriate way and if necessary. Consulting with professionals about how much to share could be beneficial.

Discussing divorce with young children can be complicated and daunting, and adults often struggle with explaining divorce and comforting children through the fears, anxiety, and unknowns that are part of this life transition. These guidelines could significantly benefit both parents and children as the family adapts to a major life change.



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