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# TELLING YOUR CHILDREN WITH PARENTING GUIDELINES

## QUOTE

*“Give your children permission to love both parents.”*

**Y**ou and your spouse should agree in advance on the how, when, where, and answers to questions as to why you are splitting up. If you two cannot agree on the substance of your story, you should seek professional therapeutic advice and agree to follow that advice.

You and your spouse should together tell your children that you will be getting divorced, and tell all your kids at the same time.

It is important that you not reveal any anger, disappointment, frustration, hurt, blame, or fear. Watch your body language and tone of voice, in addition to the content of what you say. You must remain in control of your emotions throughout the conversation. In your discussion, you should:

- 1 Offer clear, honest explanations. Avoid elaborate details of your marital problems like affairs, sexual issues, or money problems.
- 2 Focus on what will happen to each child. Describe the basic changes—living arrangements, financial changes, and time with each parent.
- 3 Assure your children that they will be told of all major developments and changes.
- 4 Extend an invitation to your children to make suggestions that will be considered.
- 5 Stress that your children are not responsible for the dissolution of marriage, but that this is an issue between the adults. Emphasize that it is not the children’s fault.
- 6 Reassure your children that the dissolution does not weaken the bond between you and them.
- 7 Give your children permission to love both parents.
- 8 Assure your children that both parents love them.
- 9 Tell your children when you expect the divorce and resulting changes to occur.
- 10 Give your children a clear sense of an established place in each parent’s home—their own room, place for toys, shelves for toiletries, etc.
- 11 Convey that this is an adult decision and nothing the child does or can do can change this.
- 12 Tell your children if there is a counselor they can go to with questions or for help in addition to coming to you. Say whether you are talking or have spoken with a counselor. Make it clear that it is okay to need and get help.

	INFANT - 3 YR	3 - 5 1/2	5 1/2 - 8	9 - 12
REACTIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• most affected – dependent</li> <li>• least affected – too young to witness conflict</li> <li>• separation anxiety from primary caretaker</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• regressive behaviors – acting like a baby</li> <li>• fear abandonment</li> <li>• sadness</li> <li>• whining</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• sadness</li> <li>• crying</li> <li>• fear abandonment</li> <li>• intense yearning for the absent parent</li> <li>• aggression</li> <li>• feels torn</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intense anger/ at parent wanting divorce</li> <li>• ID with victim parent</li> <li>• somatic symptoms – stomachache, headache</li> <li>• school problems</li> </ul>
NEEDS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• consistency</li> <li>• continuity</li> <li>• familiarity</li> <li>• stability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• predictability</li> <li>• consistency</li> <li>• clear and specific schedule</li> <li>• stability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• attention/time</li> <li>• reassurance of love</li> <li>• adjustment time</li> <li>• shield from conflict</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• stability</li> <li>• shield from conflict</li> <li>• allow child to love both parents</li> <li>• responsible and recreational time</li> </ul>

## QUOTE

*“The less conflict in your divorce, the better off your children will be.”*

**T**he less conflict in your divorce, the better off your children will be ... both during the divorce, immediately afterwards, and over the course of their lives. Continuing conflict between you and your spouse damages your children’s lives. For some children, the damage is permanent, as documented by the 25-year studies reported in the book *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce* by Judith Wallerstein.

Reducing conflict is hard, and requires that you love your children more than you hate, distrust, or lack respect for your spouse.

Begin by evaluating your communication. Marriages frequently break up because of an inability to communicate. These communication skills can be learned from professionals trained to assist struggling couples. If you believe communication problems are contributing to conflict, devote some thought and time to developing a communication plan. Also:

- 1 Think about your children’s present and future emotional and mental well-being before acting. This will be difficult, because of your own feelings, needs and emotions. Get the help of psychological professionals as needed.
- 2 While you are with your children, concentrate on parenting. Maintain your own composure and emotional balance as much as possible and in talking to yourself, verbally and in your thoughts. Laugh when you can and try to keep a sense of humor. What your children see in your attitude is to some measure reflected in theirs.
- 3 Keep the other parent informed and involved in the children’s lives. Email and fax information daily. Leave adjectives out of the messages. Provide just the facts. If the children say the other parent said something, report this in the message without editorial. It may be that this will precipitate recognition of a need to seek professional advice.
- 4 Give the other parent copies of all notices and make all appointments when the other parent can attend. Your children have two parents. It may be that the other parent never wanted this information before and wants it now. Do not analyze the reasons; ask about it at your next conference. Whether or not the other parent ever attends, keep giving notices and make all appointments when the other parent can attend.

5

Keep a pad and pencil and a manila envelope near the refrigerator. If a child comes with or has information or has an accomplishment, however small, tell the child that you and the child are going to write it down immediately, date and time, so that all can remember to tell the other parent. This shows the child that you respect the other parent. It is okay to include and involve the other parent in the child's life. This is in the best interests of the minor child. You can put copies of notices in this envelope as well as copies of some schoolwork and artwork for the child to take to the other parent. Make this practice reciprocal; it should not include messages between parents or money exchange –nothing to cause stress or difficulty for the child.

6

Set aside time to mourn and be sad each day, after the children are asleep or not at home. Keep your composure around the children at all times.

7

Allow yourself and your children time for readjustment. Convalescence from an emotional body blow like divorce is essential.

8

Remember the best parts of your marriage. Remember the skills and positive attributes of the other parent. Your child is one-half mother and one-half father and is a product of the marriage. Use these good parts constructively by sharing them with your children to build self-esteem.

## QUOTE

*"Allow your children to be children. Do not confide in them, whatever their age."*

9

Assure your children that they are not to blame for the break-up and that they are not being rejected or abandoned. Children, especially the young ones, often mistakenly feel they have done something wrong and believe that the problems in the family are the result of their own misdeeds. Small children may feel that some action or secret wish of theirs has caused the trouble between their parents. Explain to them that there are other children whose parents have been divorced and that they are not going to lose their mom or dad.

10

Continuing anger or bitterness toward your former partner can injure your children far more than the divorce itself. The feelings you show are more important than the words you use. Watch your body language, tone of voice, as well as what you say.

11

Refrain from voicing criticism of the other parent. It is difficult, but absolutely necessary. For a child's healthy development, it is important for him to respect both parents and believe both parents respect each other, even if that is not the truth.

12

Do not force or encourage your children to take sides. To do so encourages frustration, guilt, and resentment.

13

Allow your children to be children. Do not confide in them, whatever their age.

14

Try not to abruptly upset the children's routine. Children need a sense of continuity and it is disturbing to them if they must cope with too many changes all at once.

15

Dissolution of marriage often leads to financial pressures on both parents. Do not discuss finances with the children. Never mention payment or non-payment of support.

16

Marriage breakdown is always hard on the children. They may not always show their distress or realize at first what this will mean to them. Parents should be direct and simple in telling children what is happening and why, and in a way a child can understand and digest. This will vary with the circumstances and with each child's age and comprehension. The worst course is to try to hush things up and make a child feel he or she must not talk or even think about what he or she sees is going on. The child must be allowed to express unhappy feelings. If the child asks questions, explanations should be brief, prompt, direct, and honest.

17 The guilt parents may feel about the marriage breakdown may interfere in their disciplining the children. A child needs consistent control and direction. Permissive or indecisive parents, who leave a child at the mercy of every passing whim and impulse, interfere with a child's healthy development. Children need and want to know quite clearly what is expected of them. Children need leadership and sometimes authority. Parents must be ready to say "no" when necessary.

18 Do not overlook the fact that you are only human and admit it. You will not be able to make a 100% score on being the perfect parent. No one ever does. When you fall short in your attempts, acknowledge it and resolve to improve day by day.

19 Offer the children the opportunity for professional assistance. Tell them that this is okay and normal. That it will be confidential. That the parents have this help.

20 Read and re-read these basic guidelines. Add to them by writing down your own constructive and positive approaches to the handling of your new way of living.

Read books on children and divorce. Here are some suggested titles.

## BOOKS FOR YOU

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- *Mom's House, Dad's House*, Ricci
- *Stepping Back From Anger: Protecting Your Children During Divorce*, American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, 800-422-6595
- *How to Survive the Loss of A Love*, Colgrave, Bloomfield and McWilliams
- *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*, Fisher and Ury
- *Helping Your Kids Cope with Divorce the Sandcastles Way*, Neuman
- *Growing up Divorced: How to Help Your Child Cope With Every Stage—From Infancy Through the Teens*, Franke
- *Why Good Parents Have Bad Kids*, Hayes
- *101 Ways to Be a Long-Distance Super Dad or Mom*, 520-325-1224
- *The Good Marriage*, Wallerstein
- *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*, Tannen
- *The Family Puzzle: A Guide to Parenting the Blended Family*, Palmer
- *Whose Kid Is It Anyway and over 400 Other Questions for Divorcing, Dating, and Remarried Families*, Sabo, Gershman, and Waxman

## BOOKS FOR YOUR CHILDREN

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- *The Kids' Book of Divorce, By, For and About Kids*, Rofes
- *Divorce Is a Grown-Up Problem*, Gray
- *My Mom and Dad Are Getting a Divorce*, Bienenfeld