

## **Listening to Kids with Your Heart**

Separation and divorce are very difficult times for adults. There is pain, anger, and disappointment. Children can be seriously and negatively affected as well.

Easing this transition and helping them get started on the adjustments they will have to make requires great skill and patience on the part of the divorcing parents. Here are some suggestions.

Children's reactions to parental divorce are often related to how parents inform them of their decision. Because of this, it is important for parents to think carefully about how they will tell their children and what they will tell them.

When possible, the entire family should meet together so that both parents can answer children's questions. This strategy may also help parents to avoid blaming each other for the divorce. Plan ahead of time what you will tell the children. Stay calm as you explain and answer questions.

Remember that divorce is confusing for children. When you first talk with children, limit your discussion to the most important and most immediate issues. Children can become confused if they are given too much information at once.

Children need to hear that their basic needs will be met, that someone will still fix breakfast in the morning, help them with their homework, and tuck them into bed at night. Children also need to know that their relationship with both parents will continue, if possible.

In the face of so many changes, children also need to hear what will remain the same. Parents can reassure their children through words and actions that their love will continue despite the changes in routine family life.

During these family discussions, it is important for parents to tell children that the divorce is final and avoid giving children false hope that the parents will reunite.

Parents can also use this time to tell children that the divorce is not their fault. Many children believe that the divorce is a result of something that they did. Even younger children who seem to have no understanding of what is going on may need extra reassurance during this time.

For instance, when asked why parents' divorce, some children have thought their parents are divorcing because they misbehaved or received bad grades in school. Children need repeated reassurances from their parents that they are not responsible for the divorce.

Remember to ask your children about their fears and concerns. Give children time to think about the divorce and the changes ahead. Meet again as a family to talk about new questions and to reassure children of your ongoing involvement in their lives.

Take your children's questions and concerns seriously and listen to what they say. Children need to know that their parents recognize the impact of divorce on their lives. By listening to their children's thoughts and feelings about the divorce, parents demonstrate their ongoing care and concern.

Realize that feelings of loss and anger are typical. You can't change your child's feelings, but it is important to let your child know you understand them.

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