What Do We Tell The Kids?

Once the decision to separate has been made, the next big concern is telling the children. What you tell your children depends upon their age and beyond what you tell them, is how you tell them and then how you support them emotionally thereafter.

Certainly dealing with a toddler and younger, there is little you can tell them that they will truly understand. More important than explanations to the toddler, is managing their experience of the parental separation and making sure the child has frequent time with both parents so that the separation is not felt like an abject loss of a parent.

For the preschool child, simple explanations, such as mommy and daddy won’t be living together is a good starting point. Your child will likely be confused by such a message and wonder if the outcome is related to something about him or herself. If you tell your child something like mommy and daddy don’t get along, or we don’t love each other, but still love you, it may leave the child wondering what will happen if he or she falls out of favour with a parent. So it is important to shy away from big, long drawn out explanations in favour of brief explanations that concentrate more on how things will change and how you will help the child cope with the change.

For the young school age child, he or she will also wonder if their own behaviour played into the outcome. Hence the child will need reassurance that the decision for the parents to separate had nothing to do with the behaviour of the child and nor is it the child’s responsibility to fix or do anything on behalf of the parents.

The older school age child will not only be upset about the parental separation, but will be concerned for the impact of change on his or her own life. For a child of this age it becomes important to explain the plans you may have, how their life will be affected and how you will help them manage change.

The teenaged child can show tremendous concern for the well being of a parent or parents or alternately concern mainly for him or herself and sometimes concerns equally for parent(s) and him or herself. The teen will be quite worried for how his or her life will be affected, what it means in terms of school and friends. They will need reassurance that you will heed their input into decisions affecting them.

Regardless of the age of the child, it is helpful for the child that the parents are able to manage their own emotions at the time. The degree to which a parent becomes emotional and distraught signals to the child that life is scary, out of control or at least very terrible. They will worry more for themselves and for the parent at a time when they are counting on the parent as their own source of support.

Parents are cautioned to know that telling a child on one occasion about the parental separation does not equal the child adjusting immediately to the message. Children will need time to make sense of what they are told. They will emerge with a number of different feelings and questions. Some children may withdraw and others may act out their feeling through inappropriate behaviour.

Parents are advised to reassure their children, let them have input into minor decisions affecting them (choice of a new bedroom, furniture, colour of paint) and appreciate that as they may vent negative emotions, they are expressing their upset for the loss of the family as they new it. Parents can help them cope simply by listening to them non-judgementally and helping them continue with their responsibilities such as homework and attending their extra-curricular activities.

Throughout, parents must also remember not to intrude on the children’s relationship with each parent and not to disparage the other parent to the children. That way they can not only be loved by both parents but feel free to love each parent too.

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