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How to Talk to Your Kids About Divorce

Erin Olson

Dordt College, erin.olson@dordt.edu

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How to Talk to Your Kids About Divorce

Abstract

"Being a parent often means answering some tough questions and helping little ones understand things even we as adults might find confusing."

Posting about addressing family brokenness with children from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/how-to-talk-to-your-kids-about-divorce/>

Keywords

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Disciplines

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

How to Talk to Your Kids About Divorce

 [inallthings.org/how-to-talk-to-your-kids-about-divorce/](https://www.allthings.org/how-to-talk-to-your-kids-about-divorce/)

Erin Olson

“Why do Tommy’s parents live in separate houses?”

“Why does David’s dad live in Missouri, but his mom lives in Iowa?”

“What’s a stepsister? Why does Betsy have a stepdad?”

Perhaps your kids have asked you questions similar to these. Being a parent often means answering some tough questions and helping little ones understand things even we as adults might find confusing. Divorce can be difficult for anyone to understand, and even if you’re not going through a divorce yourself, it’s likely that your children, at some point, will hear the news that someone—a friend or family member—is getting divorced. When children hear about divorce, they will likely have questions about what it means and if it could happen to your family.

When I was eight years old, my parents separated and then divorced within the year. You can read more about my “dysfunctional” family [here](#). I clearly remember the night my parents sat us down to tell us my dad was leaving and they didn’t know when or if he’d be back. I wasn’t a stranger to divorce—another family from our church had recently gone through a divorce—but I remember being in denial, assuming my dad would be back home in time for our church Christmas program later that month. But that night, I didn’t ask many questions and I showed almost no emotion.

Now, as a parent myself, I think about how difficult it must have been for my mom and dad to plan for how they were going to deliver this significant news. My kids have not only been exposed to divorce in our church and our community, but I’ve also had to explain to them my own somewhat complicated family tree. They understand that some of their grandparents used to be married but now they aren’t anymore and that they’re each remarried to another one of their grandparents. They know that some of my siblings and I have the same parents, and some of us don’t. And you know what? They don’t care about those details. All of their grandpas and grandmas, aunts and uncles, and cousins are all the same to them—we don’t use the term half or step when referencing our family members. To my kids, and to all of us, we are just family.

Here are some of my thoughts for how to tell your kids about your own divorce:

If this is your own divorce:

Be prepared for a variety of emotions. Kids will respond differently to the news. Not all kids will be sad right away, and some may have emotions we might consider inappropriate. The range of emotions will likely change daily and weekly. Be ready and willing to walk with your child through all the emotions, and if you feel like you can’t, enlist the help of a professional.

Plan ahead. Think about what you’re going to say ahead of time and know how you’re going to explain what is happening.

Present a united front. Both parents should be on the same page and communicate the same message to the children. Co-parenting will be your main priority for a while and your kids need to see, right away, that you can put aside your differences to communicate as their parents. This is not a time for blaming or pointing fingers.

Answer questions as honestly as possible. If you’re not sure what the future holds, tell them that. Don’t make promises you can’t keep. If you’re taking a temporary separation, don’t promise that you’ll get back together. Don’t

promise that your children will see each parent equally after the divorce. Again, be as honest as possible and if there are things about the logistics related to custody and visitation that you don't know the details of, be clear with your kids that those details will be worked out as soon as possible and with their best interests in mind.

Reinforce that the divorce is not their fault. Young children especially often assume that a divorce means they did something wrong, or they start to think they could have done something differently to prevent their parents' separation or divorce. Children need to hear that this decision has nothing to do with them and that both parents love them and will continue to love them regardless of their marital status.

Recognize that the age of the child(ren) makes a difference. My brother and I were little—seven and eight with fairly limited developmental understanding of the ways of the world. But my sister was fifteen, a teenager with a different way of interacting with and understanding her world. By the time they sat down to tell my brother and me, they had already told my sister.

Be united as parents. Divorce can often be painful, and the hurt it causes can lead spouses (or former spouses) to feel very angry and resentful toward each other. The best thing you can do for your kids is to put that anger and resentment behind you and work on your co-parenting relationship. Put your kids' needs ahead of your disagreements with your ex-spouse. Your kids need to see that even if you're no longer together or married, you can put aside your differences and get along for the good of your children.

If you're trying to help your kids understand divorce in general, try to refrain from judgment. Even if you have an opinion about the relationship status of the couple or family your child is asking about, it's best to keep those opinions to yourself. Pray for the family—for the spouses and the children—and teach your children to as well. Be a listening ear to them rather than a judgmental spirit.

Ultimately, it's important to teach your kids that even divorce is able to be redeemed by the grace of God. Any family, no matter how broken, can experience God's redemptive mercies. Isaiah 61:3 says, "... provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair." Our God is in the business of making beauty from ashes. Family brokenness and divorce are not beyond God's redemptive plan for his creation.