

## **TIPS FOR DIVORCING PARENTS**

**By Michael A. Robbins**

The following is a list of tips that I would offer to divorcing parents to make the divorce process easier for their children:

### **1. TELLING YOUR CHILD ABOUT THE DIVORCE**

1. Although there is no easy way to break the news, both parents should be present when the child is told, and feelings of anger, guilt, or blame should be left out of the conversation. This is a very difficult message to communicate and must be handled sensitively to make it less painful for the child.
2. The conversation must be tailored towards the child's age and development, but all children should receive the same basic message: "Mommy and Daddy used to love each other and we were happy, but now we are not happy and have decided we would be happier apart. What happened occurred between us, but we will always be your parents and we will always be there to love and take care of you."
3. It is extremely important to emphasize that the child is in no way to blame for the breakup and that the unhappiness is not related to the child. Children tend to blame themselves for the failure of their parent's marriages, and they need to be reminded frequently that this is not the case.
4. The child may question whether their parent's love for them is also temporary and the child must be re-assured that even though the parents are getting a divorce, their love for the child is permanent and unconditional.
5. The child must be given enough information so that they are prepared for changes in their lives, but not so much information as to frighten them. The child does not need to know all of the details, but must understand clearly that although the parents are divorcing each other, they are not divorcing the child.
6. It is important to recognize the response from the child. Not all children react the same way when they are told that their parents are divorcing. Some ask questions, some cry and some have no response at all. If the child seems upset when the news is broken, let them know you recognize and care about their feelings and reassure them. If the child doesn't have any emotional reaction right away, they must know that their parents will always be available at a later time to talk.

7. Just as important as telling the children about the divorce is giving the children an opportunity to ask questions. Children are concerned about how the divorce will effect them: Who will I live with? Will I move? Where will Mommy live or where will Daddy live? Will I go to a new school? Can I still go to camp this summer? Parents must be honest when addressing their children-s concerns, and remind them that the family will get through this, even though it may take some time. Parents must be honest with their children and reassure them that they will be loved no matter what happens.

## 2. **WHAT PARENTS CAN DO TO HELP THEIR CHILDREN COPE WITH THE DIVORCE**

1. Invite conversation. The child needs to know that their feelings are important to their parents and that they will be taken seriously.
2. Help the children put their feelings into words. A child-s behavior can often clue the parents in to their feelings of sadness or anger. Parents must recognize this and say "It seems as if you're feeling sad right now. Do you know what's making you feel so sad?" Be a good listener and be honest.
3. Legitimize your child-s feelings. Saying things like, "No wonder you feel sad" or "I know it feels like the hurt may never go away, but it will" lets the child know that their feelings are valid.
4. Offer support. Ask the child "What do you think will help you feel better?" They may offer a few suggestions or possibly you can suggest a few ideas.
5. Don't bad mouth your spouse in front of your children, even if you are angry or feuding. This is very hard to do, but it makes the child feel even more in the middle. Children may feel "If Mommy or Daddy are bad, and they are part of me, so I must be bad". Children must discover the truth for themselves.
6. Do not use your children as messengers. A child should not feel that he or she must act as a messenger between hostile parents or carry one adult-s secrets or accusations about the other. Parents must keep their adult life as private and discrete as possible. Communication must take place directly between the parents regarding such things as scheduling, parenting time, support, or school problems.
7. Protect the other parent-s parenting time schedule. Parents must work together to coordinate parenting time and make it pleasant. Parents must make sure that their child feels free to tell them that they had a good time during parenting

time with the other parent. Parents must also encourage children to communicate by telephone with the other parent.

8. Parents must protect the child's positive feelings about the other parent. Parents should not subject children to bad memories.
9. Parents should not argue in front of their children. Traumatic events like screaming, fighting, arguing or violence can make the child fearful and apprehensive. Unable to deal with these fears, children may become emotionally upset, controlling or withdrawn. When children witness inappropriate behavior from their parents, this is an inappropriate behavior model since they are still learning from their parents how to deal with their own impulses. Be civil to your spouse in front of the children. This will help the children better adjust.
10. Be consistent. Children need stability, limits and familiarity. Parents must try to minimize disruptions to the children's school, homework, meals, extracurricular activities, chores, and bedtime routines. Discipline must continue. The children must know who the parents are and that each have an equal say in how to raise them.
11. Avoid making any big changes. The divorce itself is enough shock for the children to handle for a while. Switching schools, moving to a new house, or any other major change may be too difficult for them now and should be avoided.
12. Get your own emotions under control. If parents fall apart or get depressed and withdrawn, the children may too. If the parents run around blaming everyone else and acting like the victim, the children may too. However, if parents can keep it together, at least in front of the children, the children will hold up better. This doesn't mean that parents should suppress their feelings, but rather they should get help, if necessary.
13. Recognize when it is time to call a professional. Sometimes despite the best intentions, parents and children may need outside help. Support from professionals, clergy, friends, relatives and groups can help parents and children adjust to separation and divorce. Children are often helped when they meet others who are going through similar situations or who have developed successful relationships with their parents after a divorce. Ideally, children need to feel positive about both parents and parents need to be emotionally available for their children.

3. **TIPS TO BEING A SUCCESSFUL PARENT**

1. Provide unconditional love and encouragement. As a parent, you are the first one to convince a child of their worth and help them venture into the world with confidence.
2. Make your child your highest priority. To be an effective parent, you must rank your priorities. Everyone faces tremendous demands each day, but family life cannot be threatened by competing priorities. Parents must learn to distinguish the important things, like spending time with their children, from other seemingly urgent events.
3. Parents must work together. For example, one parent may act as the principal caretaker of immediate physical and emotional needs. The other parent may tend to promote risk-taking and independence, and build self-reliance and assertiveness. Working together, both parents can offer their children the best situation possible.
4. Discipline consistently. The best way to help teach children to distinguish right from wrong is by setting clear limits and enforcing them consistently. When a child breaks the rules, parents must respond in an appropriate way that won't ruin the child's self-esteem. However, it is important to remember that discipline is not always just a question of punishment. It is also about modeling positive behavior. Parents are a children's best role models.
5. Teach responsibility. One of the best gifts you can give a child is to help them understand that they are responsible for their own choices and the consequences of their actions. Parents must also encourage children to tackle new skills and learn in the process. Parents must explain to children that they will make mistakes and learn from their mistakes. This will promote a sense of competence and self-confidence.
6. Teach your children how to relax. Parents have a tendency to go, go, go all day long and not relax until the children are in bed. This means that children never see their parents relax. Since children learn from example, they may never learn how to relax unless they are taught by their parents. Children must see their parents listening to music, reading, gardening, watching TV, exercising or other means of relaxation. Parents are better able to take care of their children when they are taking care of themselves.
7. Take some time each day to talk with your children and have fun with them. Ask specific questions each day about your child's day to show that you are interested. Find time each day to have fun with your child whether it is playing games, sports, on the computer or any other quality time.

8. Let your child be a child. Let children be loud and rambunctious for at least a few minutes every day. Children need to let off steam and release stress.
9. Praise your child and let them know that you love them. Parents are always so quick to point out when a child misbehaves, but rarely to point out how proud they are when they behave in a positive way. Children need to be stroked daily and told that they are good and that they are loved.

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