

Your Children

Helping your kids through any divorce



GALBRAITH
FAMILY LAW

PROFESSIONAL CORPORATION

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Chapter 1:

How Do We Tell Our Children?

Explaining Divorce to Small Children

If you plan to divorce your spouse and you have small children, you are likely pondering just how to go about breaking the news. A child's world revolves around the family unit. The news of a divorce can be crushing.

The way you communicate the news will go a long way in determining how your child reacts. Choose your words carefully. How you approach the issue will play a significant role in how your children bounce back from this sad news and shape them for years to come.

Tell Your Children with Your Spouse

If possible, it's best that you and your spouse tell the children together. Develop a game plan about what will be said by whom. If you think it will be too difficult to do together, get a family coach to assist you. Giving the children a clear and united message is important.

The "Do"s of Explaining Divorce to Small Children

When you are preparing for this conversation, conjure up an explanation that is "kid friendly". Speak in an empathetic tone, but you don't have to be brutally honest. Your children deserve an honest explanation, but you can explain the issue more in-depth when they are older. They do not need to know who is to blame or any of those details.

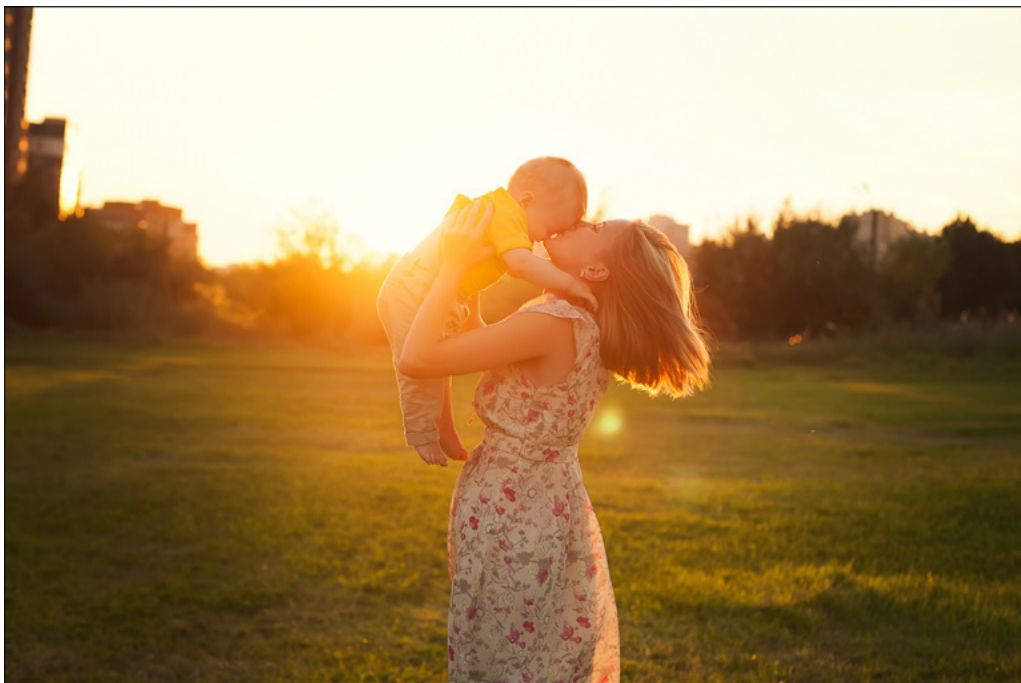
Cut to the Chase

Get right to the point instead of beating around the bush. A long-winded explanation will only prolong your child's pain and

anxiety. You don't have to use sweeping generalizations, but you should prepare a few brief statements to explain why the divorce is happening. Saying, "We can't get along like we used to," or "Mom and dad need some time apart," will get to the point in simple terms. Most parents tell their children too much. Keep it short.

Reinforce Your Love

After you've broken the bad news, it is critical that you tell them that you love them. Communicate that while you can't get along with your spouse, you will always get along with them. If they know that you'll always be available to help them with their homework and teach them how to do certain things, they'll be less nervous about the pending split.



Keep Your Child's Specific Age in Mind

If your children are young (5 years old and younger), telling them about your divorce will be quite the challenge. Children this young typically don't take the news very well. Many go on to blame themselves and believe that they played a role in their parents' separation. It is critical that they know they had nothing to do with mom and dad's separation. Explain that mom and dad have grown apart. It is imperative that you explain that you still love your child but you need to be apart from your spouse. It is also important that you tell them it is okay for them to love both mom and dad.

You don't have to use the word "divorce" with your young child. Sometimes, kids this young haven't learned what the word means and they'll be confused. Say something like, "Mom and dad will be living apart from each other but you'll still see each of us on a regular basis". This will help to console your small child and help him better understand what is happening in general terms. The underlying message should be that you both still love your children and that you'll both always love them in the future.

If your child is a bit older (6 to 8 years old), he or she will likely know what the word "divorce" means. They may have heard the word at school or from TV and the Internet. They'll likely know what a divorce entails. You'll still have to explain why you are separating from their mother or father. This doesn't mean that you have to give him every single detail. Be straightforward and communicate as much of the truth as possible. Hopefully, he'll understand that adults who spend this much time together sometimes grow apart.

Reinforce Your Love

What matters the most is that you explain that your love for your child is everlasting. Explain when you'll be able to visit with your child in case you don't have sole custody. If you have a matrimonial settlement agreement that explains your visitation rights, use it to prepare a written schedule before you speak with your child about

the divorce. This way, you'll be able to let him know when you can spend time together in the future so that he has something to look forward to. Write out the schedule for your child. Post it on the fridge or give them a copy to look at whenever they need to.

Explain That a Transition Period Is Coming

Once you've broken the news to your child, transition into what will change. Explain that while some things will be different, others will stay the same. Tell them that you'll handle each change as it arises and always ask for their feedback about how they feel about these transitions. Your child has every right to know all the details about how their life will be changing.

The "Don't"s of Explaining Divorce to Small Children

Young children will often act out emotionally in response to the news of a divorce. Expect the worst. Don't be tempted to lie about the separation to better console your children. Always remain honest. No matter what, you must explain that you are the problem. Don't let your children believe that they are the cause of the divorce.

Don't Jump Right into the Conversation Without Preparing

Your children will likely ask you some tough questions, so prepare ahead of time. Try to imagine what your children will ask you before you actually sit down to speak with them. With this game plan in place, you'll be better prepared to answer questions and you won't feel as nervous about speaking about this sensitive subject. If you don't know the answer, be honest. Reassure them that you will figure it out and that everything will be okay.

Don't Assign Blame

Don't blame your spouse for the divorce. You may sincerely believe that your spouse is the cause of the divorce. You don't want your child to know this and hold a grudge against your soon-to-be ex-wife or ex-husband. It will just make the family dynamic more unstable. If there was adultery, you should never tell your children about it.

Don't Jump Into Specifics Right Away

Often, divorce has a bigger impact on the children than the parents. Tell them how their living arrangements, activities and school might change in superficial terms. You don't have to delve into the specifics of these changes during the initial conversation unless your children ask for details. By knowing what will change, your children will be able to brace themselves for this transition period.

Bottom Line

Your children need to know the following:

1. It's not their fault
2. You both love them
3. It's okay that the children love both parents
4. They will see each parent regularly
5. It's going to be okay
6. Don't get into the details of the causes or blame for the divorce



Chapter 2:

When Will I See My Kids?

There is nothing more important to us than our kids. We love them, and when we go through a separation or divorce, we worry how it will impact our relationship with our children.

Decision-Making

“Custody” is the legal word we use to describe how decisions are made about the children. Joint custody means both you and your ex-spouse will make the major decisions together. Sole custody means only one parent will make the major decisions and the other parent has the right to information about the kids. Custody has nothing to do with the amount of time the children spend with each parent.

Major decisions include non-emergency health care decisions, the school they will attend, religious training they will be exposed to and activities they will be involved in. The-day-to-day decisions are in the hands of the parent caring for them at the time. There is a trend towards joint custody, as many believe that children benefit from having both parents involved in decision-making when possible. Although it may be difficult to imagine working cooperatively with your ex-spouse, it usually happens in time. If your situation is a high conflict case then perhaps sole custody is more appropriate. The reality is that your parenting will evolve over time regardless of the title you use now. We encourage you to work to allow it to evolve positively for the sake of your children.

Children's Schedule

Many spouses choose to schedule time with the children equally. Often, it is “week-about,” meaning the children rotate between homes on a weekly basis. If you and your ex-spouse agree to a rotating weekly schedule, social workers advise that the best transition day is Sunday or Monday because the next day is a structured school day. It makes the transition from one home to the other easier.

In other arrangements, children reside primarily at one home and spend time with the other parent on a regular basis, such as every second weekend and one day during the week.

You can be creative with your time sharing arrangements. People who work unusual shifts or have a changing work schedule need to find a time-sharing arrangement that will work for the realities of their lives.

Balance, Consistency and Predictability

Ideally, you and your ex-spouse will find a realistic balance between the children's school and extra-curricular activities, your work schedules and your availability to care for the children. Whatever you decide, it's important to maintain consistency and predictability for the children's sake.

Special Occasion and Holidays

Children enjoy the prospect of celebrating a special occasion twice. For example, they may enjoy two birthday celebrations, two Christmases, two Easters and two Thanksgivings.

I encourage you to not worry about having your children on any particular day. You can make any day special and celebrate your important events when your children are with you. It will work out if you keep in mind that what is important is that you are celebrating with your children.

Perhaps you celebrate other events such as Hanukkah or Eid Al-Fitr. Whatever occasions or celebrations are important to you and your family, they can be addressed in your separation agreement.

Sometimes, summer vacation is divided equally. For example, two weeks at a time while alternating between homes. Others agree to maintain their regular time-sharing regime, but each will get two or three weeks of vacation time with the children upon notice. You

may agree that Father's Day is with father and Mother's Day is with mother or you may just ignore these days and let them fall in accord with the regular schedule.

Some feel it is important to see their child on their birthday each year and make special provisions. Others celebrate birthdays whenever their child is with them.



Flexibility is important, even with a consistent and predictable schedule. If special opportunities arise that benefit your children, you may trade time with your ex-spouse. For example, if your ex-spouse's parents have tickets for the children to attend a show, trade that night for another night so the kids can attend the special event.

If you have special events or a particular tradition, include it in your parenting plan. Be creative. Your parenting schedule should reflect your family's circumstances and can be unique.

What if My Spouse Isn't Cooperating?

Remember to treat your ex-spouse as you would like them to treat you. Although your ex-spouse may not always reciprocate, take the high road and do the right thing for your children's sake.

The worst thing to do is to fight in front of your children. Psychologists tell us that exposing your children to arguments with your ex-spouse can be psychologically damaging to children. If you have a disagreement, do the arguing out of ear shot of your children.



Chapter 3:

Who Can Help Me?

Should We Get a Counselor for the Children?

Often, children benefit from having their own counselor. A counselor is a neutral and supportive party who keeps conversations with the children confidential.

Divorce is a difficult transition for children. In time, they may not need a counselor to deal with divorce-related issues, but other issues may arise. Teenagers often have an adverse reaction to advice offered by their parents. A counselor can help your teenager through these challenging years.

Initially, during your divorce, your children may attend more frequently due to their need. Over time, they may go two or three times a year. Costs not covered by a health benefit plan may be shared in proportion to you and your ex-spouse's incomes or shared equally.

Will We Use a Family Coach?

We recommend our clients work with a family coach. They are trained professionals who can help you and your ex-spouse craft a parenting plan in the best interests of your children. As parenting experts, they are aware of the latest research on the developmental needs of children, especially those going through a divorce. They do more than establish a time-sharing regime. They can help you plan for potential future challenges, such as introducing new partners, the teenage years and how you will communicate regarding issues and challenges that may arise.

A Family Coach:

- Teaches you how you can help your children thrive after separation and divorce.
- Helps develop an agreement on the time your children will spend with each of you on a regular basis and over holidays.

- Brings the voice of the children to the negotiations about parenting.
- Educates you and your ex-spouse on the most recent research regarding the developmental needs of the children, especially those whose parents are separating and divorcing.

A parenting plan may include references on how you will deal with sensitive issues in the future to minimize future conflicts. For example, how and when new partners will be introduced to the children.

Can We Afford This?

The cost of a family coach is substantially less than the cost for each party to pay for a lawyer. The cost of a family coach can be shared by you and your ex-spouse, resulting in a cost-effective way to resolve parenting issues

Like a mediator, the family coach will help you and your ex-spouse discover your interests, priorities and core concerns around parenting so you can develop a parenting plan that meets those concerns and goals. As a neutral and objective expert, your family coach will ensure that the parenting plan is in the best interests of your children.

When a family coach has completed the parenting plan, it will be sent to your lawyers. Your lawyer will review it with you and offer advice. If acceptable to both parties, it will be appended to the separation agreement and become a legally binding agreement.

Chapter 4:

What Can I Do to Help My Kids Through This?

We often direct our clients to the wonderful wisdom of Sue Cook. She is one of the most insightful experts on guiding children and parents through divorce.

Sue Cook is a respected blogger and the owner and operator of the Family Therapy and Life Coaching Group. Her website is www.FamilyTLC.ca. We hope you will find the following tips by Sue helpful.

10 Tips for Building Resilience in Children and Teens

Help your children develop resilience through separation and divorce. Resilience, the ability to cope with stressful situations, thoughts, and actions are things that can be learned over time.



1. Make connections: Connecting with others provides social support and strengthens resilience. One way to foster a connection is to build a strong family network to help support your child. Also, teach your child to make friends. Friendship will help develop

empathy, the ability to feel another person's pain, and this will deepen your child's connections.

2. Help your child to help others: By helping others, children who feel helpless gain a sense of empowerment and accomplishment. Engage your child in age-appropriate volunteer work, or ask for assistance on a task that they can manage easily.

3. Maintain a daily routine: Children crave structure in their lives. A regular routine is both predictable and comforting. Encourage your child to develop his or her own routines. They'll be more likely to stick to the routine if they are part of the decision-making process.

4. Take a break: Children are overloaded with information that may sometimes upset them. Conversations, the internet, the news, or thoughts and discussions about separation and divorce can be overwhelming. Make sure your child has the opportunity to take a break.

5. Teach Your child self-care: Be a good example and teach your child about healthy eating, exercise and rest and relaxation. Your child will be more balanced and better able to deal with stressful times.

6. Move towards your goals: Praise, even for baby steps, toward a goal will allow your child to focus on an accomplishment rather than what they have yet to accomplish. This can help build the resilience needed to move forward in the face of a challenge.

7. Nurture a positive self-view: Teach your child to see the humour in life and have the ability to laugh at themselves. Remind them of the times they've successfully handled past hardships and help them understand that past challenges help build the strength needed to handle future challenges.

8. Keep things in perspective and maintain a hopeful outlook: An optimistic and positive outlook enables your child to see the good things in life and keep going even in the hardest of times. Although your child may be too young to consider a long-term outlook on his/her own, help them to see that there is a future beyond the current situation and that the future can be good.

9. Look for opportunities for self-discovery: Show your children that hardship can teach them what they are made of. Tough times are often the times when children learn the most about themselves

10. Accept that change is part of living: Transition is often frightening for children and teens. Help your child see that change is part of life and new goals can replace goals that have become unattainable.



Chapter 5:

How Do I Maintain My Relationship With My Kids?

The reality is that most parents are able to maintain strong relationships with their children after separation. In fact, some are able to strengthen their relationships with their kids because they are focused solely on their children when they are together. It can be a challenge but here are some ideas:

Use Skype, FaceTime or Google Hangouts. These are free inter-net-based video conferencing systems. To operate, they require high-speed internet access and a webcam on each computer, cell phone or tablet. FaceTime is an Apple product. It's almost like being in the same room and works especially well with younger children.

Use email, texting, Facebook or whatever internet-based system your child may be using. Even a brief text message exchange can make you both feel connected but doesn't interfere with your ex-spouse's time with the children.

Schedule regular telephone calls. They may be brief but they keep you connected.

Go to your child's extracurricular activities as much as possible, including hockey practices and games, music recitals, dance lessons and school field trips. Even if you don't speak to your child during or after the event, it will show them that you care and give you something to talk about next time they are in your care.

Focus on your kids. Keep your own activities to a minimum so you can really pay attention to your kids when they are with you. If you have chores to do, do them with your kids. Grocery shopping and cooking with kids can be fun and gives them good life lessons.

Be your kids' taxi driver. Kids need to be driven everywhere these days. Use these drives as opportunities to bond with your children. Some of the best exchanges can occur when you are driving your children to their activities.

Invite your kids' friends to do activities with you and your kids. Bring them on vacations or weekend camping trips. If you isolate your children from their friends, they won't want to keep spending time with you.

Don't smother them. Teenagers are supposed to push back. Let them become more independent and responsible. It's normal and healthy.

Be the adult. Don't share your emotional struggles with your children. Let them focus on being kids. If you need to speak to someone about your own issues, get your own divorce coach.

Don't get into arguments with your ex-spouse in front of the children. Your children will resent you even if you are in the right. Discuss issues with your ex when the kids aren't around or are asleep, or use email so the kids won't see or hear it. Some parents exchange a parenting journal when the children are exchanged. It contains important information about the children and is used to dialogue about important parenting issues.

Spend as much time with your children as possible.

If you can avoid the use of babysitters or daycare, do it. If you can't care for your children for a longer period of time, offer the extra time to your ex-spouse to care for them instead of using a babysitter.

Chapter 6:

What Happens When I Meet Someone New?

This is probably foremost in your mind the moment you become interested in someone new.

First of all, be happy! You're starting a new stage in your life and that means opening the door to let new people in. Enjoy the fact that you've found someone. Take the time to really enjoy each other. You've earned it!

This raises the question of how to handle this with the kids. You might feel like you're walking on eggshells after the divorce and are not sure either of you can handle the conversation.



Sue Cook wrote a great blog called “[Introducing a New Partner to Your Children.](#)”

She says, “For children whose biological parents are not together, the introduction of a new person may create what we call a loyalty bind. ‘How do I accept the new man in Mom’s life without betraying my Dad?’”

She also outlines a series of steps to follow along the way.

Get the timing right

Is the relationship with the new partner stable? Be sure before moving ahead.

Talk to your ex

You don’t need his or her permission to date someone else or to introduce a new partner to your children, but if your ex feels blindsided by this progression, their negative reaction could influence your children’s acceptance of the new person.

Start slow, build strong

Gradually bring the person into your family’s activities, starting in neutral settings rather than the family home.

Chapter 7:

Lessons I Learned From My Own Divorce

It's always good to hear promising or insightful things from someone who has been there.

Here are lessons that our own Brian Galbraith learned while helping his own children through a separation and divorce.

1.Kids enjoy having two Christmases, two Easters, two Thanksgivings, two sets of summer holidays! Support your kids having fun during special holidays with their other parent.

2.December 26th is just as good as December 25th to celebrate Christmas.

3.Get the issues resolved as fast as possible so you can focus on your kids. Unresolved issues can distract you from being the best parent to your kids.



4. When the kids act out, it may not be related to the divorce. Kids act out! Especially teenagers. That's what they are supposed to do!

5. Kids will play one parent off against the other. Keep the communication open with your ex-spouse. Don't assume your kids always communicate things accurately.

6. Get information from the school directly. Give the teacher and principal self-addressed stamped envelopes to make it easy for them to send home newsletters and other information. Try to get their email addresses too.

7. Get information directly from coaches and others involved in your kids' lives. Make sure you are on their email lists.

8. School buses have odd rules. Make sure you learn the rules and live close to your ex if you want your kids to use the bus for both homes.

9. Kids are resilient to change. Lots of their friends have parents who have gone through a divorce. In the long term, it's not a huge deal.

10. Get your kid a therapist so they have someone to talk to about issues. Some may be related to the divorce, others may not. It's a nice gift to your kids.

11. Find activities you and your kids can do together. Spend as much time together doing things.

12. The kids shouldn't be told about the causes of the separation. It's none of their business, and in fact, it can cause them emotional harm.

13. Provide your ex-spouse with all the information about your kids you would want your ex-spouse to provide to you – even if they don't reciprocate.

- 14.** Kids grow up fast. When you have them in your care, focus on them. Soon they will be off on their own canoe camping trips with their girlfriend or boyfriend! (Boy, that's awkward!)
- 15.** Co-parenting may be difficult at first but keep trying. Always respect your ex's right to make their own decisions and keep the communication open. Over time, it will get better.
- 16.** Teach your kids to respect your ex-spouse. Get them to give cards and gifts to your ex-spouse for Christmas, birthday, Mother's Day, Father's Day.
- 17.** Create new traditions and new memories.
- 18.** Don't ever put the other parent down in front of the children. Don't support the kids putting the other parent down either.
- 19.** It's helpful to have the same rules in both houses but it isn't always possible.
- 20.** Don't try to control what is going on in the other parent's home.
- 21.** Sit your kids talk about life in your ex-spouse's home. They just want to share their life and that includes time spent with the other parent.
- 22.** Be accepting of new partners. They may spend a lot of time with your kids and you want this person to be good to your kids.
- 23.** Your ex-spouse's new partner will not replace you. You aren't threatened by your kids' teacher and they spend more time with your kids than the new partner will spend with them, so relax.
- 24.** Remind your new partner that they don't need to try to be a parent to your children. Their role is more akin to that of an aunt or uncle. They need to go slow. They should not discipline your kids instead of you. Otherwise, your kids might start resenting your new partner.

Chapter 8:

Concluding Comments

Kids are precious. Make them your priority.

Your children will be okay if you are the best parent you can be when they are in your care and if you shield them from the conflict.

Kids just want to be kids. Let them be.

For more information or to book a consultation with one of our lawyers, please go to our website: www.GalbraithFamilyLaw.com.