--- Chapter 1 ---

THE DECISION TO SEPARATE

Once the decision to separate has been made, reality as well as numbness begins to wash over you. If you have found marriage painful, you’re already becoming aware that separation and divorce will be even more so. Untangling the ties—and knots—of your marriage and your life as a couple is an experience unlike any you’ve ever had before. It will be difficult. You’re on uncharted waters and, whether you like it or not, you are the only true captain of your ship.

You may feel anger, sadness, anxiety, euphoria, depression, guilt, disorientation, fear, incompetence, shattered self-esteem, and rootlessness. The first weeks, months, or year are aptly named “crazy time” by one author. And it is.

Dr. E. Mavis Heatherington, Professor of Psychology at the University of Virginia, reports that most couples felt worse a year after the divorce than they had during the first few months. By then the novelty had worn off and the realities and loneliness had set in. I’m sharing the bad news first so that you will not be too hard on yourself during this difficult time—divorce is a stressful and painful transition. But, the good news is that your life will improve, although probably not on a timetable of your choice. Be patient.

Where do you begin? Basically, with your children, because they began with you. Divorce may be hard on a parent, but it’s even tougher on kids. Because your children are part of your lives, you and your spouse will always be part of each other’s lives, too. Divorce doesn’t mean the disappearance of your former spouse, as it sometimes does for childless couples—or at least, it shouldn’t.
The other bit of good news is that evidence today disapproves the notion that the overall impact of divorce on children is inevitably negative and damaging. Yes, divorce has a major impact on children, but children will be affected more by the way a family restructures itself and the way the feelings are handled afterward than by the divorce itself.

A study of 11 to 15 year olds by Dr. Nicolas Long of the University of Kansas Medical Center and research from the University of Georgia concluded that the amount parents argue after divorce strongly affects a child’s adjustment. The suggested solution is to avoid arguing in front of your children about money, parenting arrangements, and parenting parameters. Research indicates that children most at risk are from families where conflict and anger continue, or where the absent parent is truly absent.

THE RESTRUCTURING OF YOUR FAMILY IS IN YOUR HANDS.

DIVORCES DON’T WRECK CHILDREN’S LIVES, PEOPLE DO.

Although early studies focused on the inability of children and families to cope with divorce, we are now learning that most divorces do not routinely leave people angry and bitter. Before 1970 most research emphasized the deviant aspects of divorce. But researchers are discovering that reorganization has the potential for growth and happiness for all family members. We know that children can prosper in single parent homes as well as in two parent homes. Some children even become stronger by acquiring new coping skills. “Despite the emotional difficulties of living in a divorced family, many children of divorce grow up to be self reliant and financially responsible young adults,” says Judith Wallerstein, an authority on divorce at the University of California, Berkeley, and the executive director of the Center for the Family in Transition. In her book,
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Second Chances (HarperCollins, 1991), Wallerstein then described a generation of children as permanently scarred. Her exaggerated and alarming conclusions that were given major media attention, however, are derived from a small sample and self-selected group. She used no control group for comparison. In fact, most other research has found few, if any, psychological differences between children of divorce and those from intact families, claims marriage counselor and author, Stephanie Martson, in her book, The Divorced Parent: Successful Strategies for Raising Your Children After Separation (Pocket Book, 1994).

Dr. Constance Ahrons, from the University of Southern California’s School of Social Work, questioned the traditional stereotypical view of divorce as dysfunctional in a 1985 study. Looking at parental patterns of cooperation, she found that of the divorced couples, 28 percent fell into her category of “Perfect Pals,” 38 percent were “Cooperative Colleagues,” 25 percent were “Angry Associates,” and only 24 percent were “Fiery Foes.” Only parents in this last group were totally uncooperative. She noted that the group with the least amount of stress and the overall most functional relationship was the “Cooperative Colleagues.” This group was able to work out most of the tensions that arise in a productive manner. She sees an increasing trend for divorced couples to manage some type of healthy relationship even if it takes five years.

In her latest book, The Good Divorce (HarperCollins, 1994) Dr. Ahrons carries her case even farther, espousing our need to counteract the myths that divorce inevitably turns adults into enemies and always results in damaged children. She offers new ways to think about divorce in constructive, positive ways. “A good divorce,” she says, “is not an oxymoron. I’m tired of the doomsday reports and the label of the ‘broken home.’ We’ve been inundated with so many negative stories of divorce that men and women need to hear the message that they can make their families work better, minimize stress and not feel like total failures.”
THE DANGER OF CONTINUING CONFLICT

Studies completed by Dr. Joanne Rocklin, who works with divorcing couples, clearly show that whether the family is divorced or intact, continued parental conflict is the most harmful aspect to children of any age. Children whose parents frequently argue in front of them often are less socially competent than their peers and get lower grades in school.

Too often divorcing parents mistakenly expect conflict to disappear once they separate. In reality, fighting and anger often increase at this time, affecting children negatively and adding to the stress they feel. Keep in mind that the less conflict a child experiences, the better a child is able to adjust; the more conflict, the more difficult adjustment a child experiences. Children whose parents divorce and continue fighting, are, in effect, hit with a double whammy. Psychologist Rex Forehand at the University of Georgia feels that divorce is a plausible option if it leads to less parental fighting. One side effect he has noted is that children unknowingly pick up their parents’ patterns of conflict, often learning to handle problem situations through verbal or physical aggression.

Nurturing children well during a divorce is not easy. Your own loss and pain can overwhelm you at times. Yet, a positive restructuring of family life after divorce can result in satisfying new relationships, with all family members learning better emotional tools for coping with the future. And freed from the tensions of a difficult marriage, divorced parents often do a better job of parenting than they did while married.

Keep in mind the words of Mel Krantzler, leading divorce psychologist, in his bestselling book, Creative Divorce (Bantam, 1974). “Children are resilient. Short of actual neglect and physical abuse, children can survive any family crisis without permanent damage- and can grow as human beings in the process if they can sense some continuity and loving involvement on the part of their parents.”
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Ending a marriage is not easy. Divorce maybe commonplace today, but it is still difficult.

BREAKING THE NEWS

Once you and your spouse have discussed separation and know that it will happen, your most immediate concern should be about the what, where, when, and how of telling your children about your decision. Don’t put it off. Breaking the news to the kids could possibly be the toughest thing you’ve ever had to do and it’s an absolute necessity that they hear this from both of you both their parents. Some parents renege on this painful responsibility, especially if their children are young. One parent may simply move out, perhaps when the children are asleep. This will look and feel like desertion to a child. Researchers found in one study of preschool age children of divorced parents that an almost unbelievable 80 percent had neither been forewarned about the departure nor told why it took place. Fear of total abandonment was extreme for these children. (If one parent can leave home without explanation, might not the other parent, too?)

Though I’m a therapist, I found talking to my three children around the time of my divorce absolutely terrifying. I had never felt so inadequate or alone. I had sense enough to follow the old adage, “When in doubt, tell the truth. “ To that I added my variation, “Never lie, but the whole truth isn’t always helpful “ I answered every question asked by my children to the best of my ability but discovered most questions asked by them were easily answered. ‘Where will I live? When will we see you? Will I still get my allowance?’ -Larry Meyers, Santa Ana, CA
Children deserve to hear the truth, no matter how painful it is. A child is never too young to understand. A child left in the dark can be devastated and will imagine things far worse than the truth. A child may become convinced the divorce is his or her fault. The message you send is that your child is not important enough to be involved in serious family affairs. If a child hears about the divorce from the outside, he or she will most certainly feel betrayed.

**FOR THE KIDS’ SAKE**

Whatever your differences may be, can you and your spouse agree that you don’t want to hurt your children? Will you and your spouse work together to make the process as easy as possible for them?

When the decision has been made to separate, even the most caring parents are not totally rational. It’s hard to be supportive and available to your children’s emotional needs at this time. Don’t be too hard on yourself if you make some mistakes. Genuine consideration and concern will make up for the rough spots.

It’s important that you and your spouse thoroughly review what will be said to the children beforehand, if at all possible. Prepare for this meeting very carefully. To reduce the children’s anxiety, give them only enough information to explain the situation; try not to overburden them with details. Consider your children’s ages and developmental stages. Discuss with each other the importance of keeping the children out of your legal and financial differences. Try to reach agreement with each other on as many things as possible before approaching the kids.

Even though one parent has rejected your life together, this doesn’t mean that either he or she is not a good or capable parent. In other words, if your spouse has ended your marriage, that is not a reason for you to end or limit his or her parenting role.
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Of the following list of considerations, a discussion of the parenting arrangements is the most important. It is vital to come to a general understanding about how you wish to handle your children’s living arrangements and your parenting time. Your unofficial temporary custodial schedule will also lay the ground rules for your arrangements. Separation is a temporary but significant cant period that is a legal no man’s land a time of informal arrangements. Think through your plans as clearly as is possible. From the beginning of your separation period, before the divorce is final, you and your spouse can experiment with different living arrangements, testing, so to speak, “the custodial waters.” Discuss the fact that you will both remain open to changes to any initial arrangement but not to such a degree that it may confuse the children.

CHILD RELATED CONSIDERATIONS TO DISCUSS BEFOREHAND

• When will we tell the children?
• Will we tell them together?
• What will we tell them?
• Who will tell them what?
• How should time with the children be shared?
• How should the holidays be handled?
• How do we handle religious education?
• Who will be a primary caretaker?
• Where will the children live?
• Where will the other parent live?
• When will the departing parent move out?
• How will continuing contact with the children be handled?
TRIAL SEPARATIONS

If this is to be a trial separation, your children have a right to know. You and your spouse owe it to each other to discuss the separation and what it means before announcing it to your children. You’ll need to discuss your own “rules of the road.” In addition to the considerations just listed, think about:

- Are there any clear preconditions for a reunion? Children should also be told that it is not their behavior that will determine a reunion.
- If either of you date or have other relationships, will this stand in the way of a reconciliation?
- Are you willing to “date” each other now or later?

PLANNING YOUR WORDS

Be aware that the unknown frightens children more than the known, however unpleasant it may be. Kids’ thoughts naturally center on themselves. Thus, they worry first about what will happen to them. The greatest fear that most children have is that when some things change, all things will change. Be prepared to tell them as clearly as you can about how things will be after the separation and to assure them that they will be cared for, protected, and loved by both parents, if it is true.

- Make a checklist of the questions and issues you want to discuss with your spouse; try to think of everything the children could possibly ask- or won’t ask-but should know.
- Agree that you will not use this explanation of your divorce as an excuse for an argument between you and your spouse.
- If there is a personal or intimate problem that is inappropriate for discussion, you might both agree to a response that there are some private reasons that Mommy and Daddy can’t discuss but have nothing
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to do with children and are “adults only” problems. If substance abuse is part of the problem, avoid describing the other parent as “bad.” Instead, discuss what you do not like about your spouse’s behavior and its effect on you.

PICKING A TIME AND PLACE

Ideally, you and your spouse will arrange when and where you will tell the children. This is not always a rational process or a planned event, but if you can make it one, if you have time to prepare, keep these thoughts in mind:

• Choose a time convenient for both of you to talk with the children. Make it long enough before one parent moves out to give adequate notice, but not so far ahead that the children will think the separation will not take place. Do not have a discussion of divorce and separation unless the decision is final; living in uncertainty and worry is as hard on children as it is on adults.

• Make a firm commitment not to argue before or during the talk so that you can approach this important time calmly and reasonably. Be honest, but try to control your emotions.

• Plan to be together to tell the children if at all possible, even if one of you will do most of the talking. Children will probably have questions to ask both of you, and you owe it to them to be there to answer them. If you absolutely cannot tell them as a team, discuss together what each parent will say, so that the children will not be further confused with different stories. Have your first talk with all your children as a group, even if they are widely separated in age. Being together will help them all. There will be time later to explain more fully to those who
are old enough to know more and to comfort each individually.

- Write down your words afterward (or even before, if you wish) and give your children a backup, written explanation for them to refer to as it fits their needs.

If you know that telling the children separately is really the best way for your family or it has just happened that way, then that is how it will be. There is no perfect way to do this difficult task.

Break the news at home, not as part of an outing. Be sure the TV is off. Allow enough time to explain what you have to say and to answer any questions your children have. Don’t rush through the talk; give children time to air feelings and mull over the implications though they may not wish to belabor the discussion. Be sure to convey hope rather than despair. Earlier in the day is probably better than later in the day, but the chances are no one will sleep very well that night, anyway.

Over the next few days you might find that you will have additional sessions as questions arise.

FIRST, LAST, AND ALWAYS, CHILDREN HAVE A RIGHT TO HAVE, TO BE WITH, AND TO LOVE .. BOTH PARENTS.

IF THE DEPARTURE ISN’T PLANNED

Be honest with your children. If the move took place when they weren’t there, or if your spouse left in the middle of the night, tell them it was a real move, not that “Daddy’s going to be on a business trip for a few days” or “Mommy’s gone to visit Grandma.” A lie will only require farther explanations later and cause the children more confusion and anxiety.
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If one parent has asked the other to leave or had him (her) removed because of fear of physical harm, it is important to explain this to children. If the leave taking involves an angry scene or a display of other strong emotions that the children witness, try to explain it as rationally and as calmly as you can later, however upset you maybe. The departed parent should be urged to write or call the children immediately to help them understand this sudden change and to establish contact.

Children can also be encouraged to write down their feelings or write a letter to the other parent to set up an “in contact” situation. Even very young children can dictate such a letter. It is an opportunity for your child to vent feelings; and you can help it to not be a guilt trip on the other parent, but rather a bridge to future contact. Hard to do but worth the effort.

TELLING THE KIDS

Saying the words, “We’re getting a divorce” to your children has been compared to shouting, “Fire!” in a crowded theater. It will be your job to reassure your children and convince them that their best interests will always be uppermost in both of your minds.

To children, parents are a package deal, not two adults with different views and values. Your children never knew you when you had prior lives apart. Parents represent a whole and a complete universe. Now you are telling them that you will be splitting something that they feel is indivisible.

FOR YOU, AS WELL AS FOR YOUR CHILDREN, THERE IS NO PAIN MORE AWFUL THAN BEING LEFT OR FORCED TO LEAVE SOMEONE YOU LOVE.
Select your words carefully. Speak in language appropriate to your children’s level of understanding. But, just as a doctor warns that a shot will hurt, be honest about the pain that’s involved, for your children and for you and your spouse as well.

- Don’t pretend it’s unimportant or make light of it. It might ease your guilt to think you won’t upset your kids, but news of their parents’ divorce is serious information to them, and you will confuse them by not treating it seriously.
- For children who are not familiar with the word, explain that divorce means that one parent will be moving out of their home and each parent will live in a separate home. They may also need explanations of the words lawyer, custody, divorce stipulation, and going to court.
- Explain what will concern the children most their future living arrangements. Tell them as much as you can about where they will live, where the departing parent will live, and when they will spend time with each parent.
- If you know you will be offering your children two homes in a shared parenting arrangement, let them know this. But don’t imagine for a minute that this is a positive selling point (“Lucky you, now you’ll have two homes instead of just one”) when you present the idea.
- Explain the details you know about expected changes. Be honest about conflicts, but don’t elaborate on those that may cause anxiety, such as money. One piece of devastating news at a time is enough. (The threat of money problems may make kids feel guilty and think that if it weren’t for them, your marriage would continue without problems.)
- Let your children know that there are many different kinds of loving. The feelings between a man and woman are not the same as the feelings a parent has for a child, even though we use the word love to describe both.
- Be honest, but don’t make excuses for the other
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parent in order to minimize a child’s pain. Just as it is important not to attack the other parent, don’t err in the other direction by covering for that parent.

- Explain that you and their other parent cannot live together any longer, but that your separating is in no way the fault of any child.
- If you’ve had marital therapy, let the children know that you tried but still couldn’t improve your relationship.
- Don’t lie to your children. The truth often comes out eventually and they will resent you for hiding it. You risk losing their trust and could damage their trust for adults in general.
- Let the children know they will be kept informed about changes that concern them. If there is the possibility of a major change, such as a move or change of school, they’ll need to know. No one likes changes, especially ones that they have no control over, but adjustment and acceptance are more positive when there has been advance warning.
- Avoid blaming your spouse for the dissolution of your marriage and home life in front of the children. Every divorce is subject to this attack. It’s tempting in every divorce there is usually one who “wants” the divorce initially but avoid it.
- Let your children hear of your love for them. And, most important, let them know you wish that their love for the other parent will continue and can grow. (No one said divorce was easy.)
- Don’t make promises you can’t keep.
- If one parent has concrete plans to move in with a lover, the children’s living options will obviously be affected. it’s best to answer truthfully rather than risk loss of trust by avoiding the subject. (Hopefully, the exiting parent will not make this type of move initially; this can be particularly confusing and difficult for children.)
In some families, one parent may be immobilized and all this responsibility may fall to the other parent. Despite feelings of numbness and confusion on the part of that parent, the children are entitled to share in and know about the changes in their family. And remember it’s important that children be told firmly that you will separate and that your plans to do so are final.

**GIVE A REASON FOR YOUR DIVORCE**

Children need to know why the divorce is occurring so they don’t blame themselves. Finding the right words is not always easy. Be sure your children are told that:

**THEY DID NOT CAUSE THE DIVORCE.. NOR COULD THEY HAVE PREVENTED IT!**

Your tone and your words make a difference. Try to explain the reasons without anger and harshness in your voice. If a parent is ill (because of alcoholism, drug addiction, or mental illness), a child needs to be told. Sometimes the ill parent is not yet receiving treatment (or even seeking it), but that parent’s “illness” can still be discussed in age appropriate words. (“Daddy/Mommy is in the hospital because he/she’s not feeling well and needs special help to talk about what is bothering him/her.”) Such illnesses may prevent that parent from showing love and concern for a child, and this knowledge will help any children.

If your household has been noisy and combative, these outward signs make it easier for children to understand that reasons may exist. On the other hand, if you don’t fight and seem to have a calm and cooperative relationship with the other parent, then children maybe at a loss to understand why you must divorce.
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They will need help understanding that:
- Not all anger is noisy anger.
- Adult sexual preferences and outside opposite sex relationship change the nature of a marriage for adults.
- Not all adults in families share the same values, and such value differences sometimes cause families to restructure.
- The purpose of the divorce is to try to make things better for one or both adults.

You might not yet truly understand the real reasons for your own divorce. Often these only reveal themselves with time. The apparent reasons or the symptomatic reasons will do as an explanation for now.

While putting Christopher to bed one night, we were talking about our separation and ultimate divorce. Rich and I had agreed to use the “Mom and Dad don’t love each other anymore” approach and say that our arguments were part of the reason. Out of the blue he asked, “Is it my fault?” I had to quickly gather my composure and tell him it was not his fault and had nothing to do with him. I was astounded that even a twenty seven month old child could assume so much responsibility. -Karyn Herrmann, Minneapolis, MN

Even if you think the reason you’re divorcing is because you and your spouse have ‘fallen out of love’ with each other, don’t tell this to your children. Aside from the fact that it will cause children to fear that you’ll fall out of love with them, it’s not the whole truth and if you don’t know that, you’re the one who needs talking to. -Hester Mundis, W. Shokan, NY
AFTER YOU’VE BROKEN THE NEWS

Don’t be surprised if a child appears to take your news lightly and perhaps even shows signs of impatience to get away. Denial and disbelief are common responses. Some children operate on the “If you don’t look at it, it will go away” premise. Your child may even express relief at first, feeling grateful there will be no more fighting in the house, but not fully realizing both parents will no longer be available simultaneously. Most, however, will be opposed to a divorce and will be angry and feel seared or anxious. Once over the shock, they may cry, though it may be hours or days later.

You would never consider performing an appendectomy on a child without anesthetic, but we do ‘parent ectomies’, on kids every day.

-Dr. Frank Williams, psychiatrist and director, Thalians Community Mental Health Center, CA

LISTEN TO THEM WITH YOUR HEART

Listen carefully to the kids’ responses, to be sure they are not misinterpreting your meanings, especially about the possibility of your reuniting. Respond to their feelings, not just to their words.

- Allow the children to show their grief after you’ve broken the news. There may be tears, denial, pleas for reconsideration, curses, threats, false bravado, or simply silence. Be sure you both show your love by holding or hugging them, if they let you. Being upset is part of what children must go through. Let them know that all these feelings are okay.
- If the child expresses strong feelings of anger toward you, avoid expressing anger in return. It’s important to let a child express these feelings without fear of losing your love.
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- If your children don’t want to talk about the divorce or share their emotions with you initially, let it go for a little while. You’re likely to hurt more than help if you force thoughts and feelings a child is not ready to confront. The truth is, the child might not yet know how he or she actually does feel. A period of denial can be a helpful coping mechanism as a short term response in stressful situations.
- Let children know you’re available to listen or to clarify any of their questions whenever they are interested in talking.
- After a few weeks, try asking a preschooler who is reluctant to talk to draw a picture about how your family looks now that a separation will (or has) occurred. Ask for explanations of what you see in the picture, and use it as a point of discussion as to why he or she thinks the divorce happened. This may help uncover any false impressions.
- Ask an older child to write a story about his or her feelings if you think they’re being suppressed.
- Encourage a child to talk to an appropriate third party who may be less involved, such as a teacher, babysitter, or relative.

Sometimes children say nothing because they don’t want to hurt you. Children often want to protect their parents and will keep their feelings inside as one way to avoid making things worse for their parents. If, after a time, you find you have gotten little feedback on their feelings, perhaps it will help if you share some of your feelings first. It’s possible to share some of your pain and concern without it being a burden to your children, and it often gives them permission to open up. They will be confused if you show no emotion and they may feel as if they must be stoic, too.

Kids don’t always have the vocabulary they need to talk about their feelings. Words you suggest might fill in their blanks. “Feeling empty” will put more common words to the feeling we know as depression; “hurting” is a grieving expression.
Allow your children time to adjust a lot of time. Understand that there is a real difference between parents and kids making adjustments. After all, one parent, if not both, have been thinking about this change for quite awhile. For most kids, it’s all brand new. Be patient with an unhappy child.

It’s hard to accept a child’s anger and hurt while you are feeling your own sense of loss and/or guilt over the divorce. Divorce tends to invalidate your own feelings of worth. It’s so tempting to try to get your sense of self worth or validation for your righteous indignation from your children. Kids often sense this and come to the rescue ... but usually at a cost to themselves.

**REMEMBER. CHILDREN DO NOT BELIEVE IN NO FAULT DIVORCE. THEY BLAME ONE OR BOTH PARENTS, OR THEMSELVES.**

All parents feel that to some degree they have failed their kids with the breakup of a marriage. Realize that these feelings are perfectly normal for you, too.

*My parents separated when I was twelve. It damaged my self-image. Nobody ever explained why the divorce was taking place and I always felt I was to blame.*

*Adrienne Barbeau, Reseda, CA*

**THE VALUE OF CRYING**

Tears are part of the human condition. All people should be permitted to cry when sad. Crying relieves tension and helps us cope with emotional loss. We now know that not allowing oneself to cry can relate to future health problems and contribute to stress related problems.
Crying is never a sign of weakness for either a child or an adult. It hurts to be rejected or left by someone you love, and crying is an honest and natural reaction to this kind of pain. Tears are a necessary part of the “letting go” process.

- Restrain yourself from saying things like, “Don’t cry. Everything will be all right.”
- Don’t deny a youngster the opportunity to cry.
- Don’t worry if you don’t know what to say. A hug or silent companionship is often all that’s needed as your response.
- Crying together as a family can be a form of support and confirmation of everyone’s sadness and sense of loss.
- Each parent and child’s need to cry publicly or privately is different.

On moving out day, my daughter saw her father break down and cry several times. I hadn’t realized she had never seen him cry before, and it was very hard on her. I tried to help her see that when something is hard on you, you do cry. I told her that I had seen her father cry before and I was glad he was the kind of man who could show his feelings.-Unsigned

Children often feel that they can’t tell parents they’ve been crying. Many just don’t know how to approach parents who now may appear wrapped up in their own problems. Letting children know that you cry privately may give a child “permission” to share the same information with you.

“Parents who cover up their feelings actually make their children’s adjustment more difficult,” says Sally Brush of the Aring Institute in Cincinnati, Ohio, which offers support services to divorcing families. “Kids get permission to grieve partly by seeing their own parents grieve.
Children of all ages need constant reassurance that their lives will not be ruined and that certain facts and feelings will not change. They need to know they can count on you. Tell them seriously and often, because it takes time for this to sink in.

- “You are not responsible in any way for the divorce.”
- “We are divorcing each other; we are not divorcing you.”
- “We are sad that this is happening, and we are sorry about it for your sake and for ours.”
- “You will always be cared for and protected.”
- “You are not going to be asked to take sides with either parent.”
- “Our decision to separate has been made; you cannot change that.”
- “The fact that Mom and Dad aren’t suited for each other any longer doesn’t mean that we aren’t suited to be your parents. We can be a mother and father to you without being husband and wife to each other.”
- “Even good parents get divorced, and we can continue being good parents to you.”
- “We seem to have problems we just can’t work out. We both feel badly about it.”
- “We loved each other when you were born. We loved you when you were born and we love you now. That will never change.”
- “Feelings of love between adults can change, but the lasting bond between a parent and child is a different and special kind of love.”
- “You may find this painful and difficult now, but you will feel better again. Happiness is down the road. Trust me.”
If parents are expressing their own feelings adequately, children don’t have to grieve for their parents but can concentrate on their own grief. Because we find it difficult to see our children in pain, we are tempted to give superficial reassurances: “Oh, honey, it’s all right. You’ll be fine. Things will be better soon.” Because it takes a long time “for things to be better” by saying this you will lose credibility; kids aren’t sure you understand the depth of their pain.

TELLING THE OTHERS

Informing friends and family of your decision will seem much easier than telling your children, because their lives will not be affected as strongly as your kids’ lives will be. The news may not be totally unexpected by adults you have confided in or who were aware of your stressful marriage. When possible:

• Inform everyone who should know about your separation in person, by phone, or by letter. However reluctant you feel about it, explanations will not be easier later. Avoid the embarrassment and confusion (for yourself and others) that are sure to result if they hear the news from someone else.

• If a reconciliation is a possibility, you may want to share that. If divorce is inevitable, say so. Verbalizing what is happening helps you become more accustomed to it, too.

• Consider using your annual holiday letter to spread the news to those who live faraway and those you don’t see often.

• Avoid discussing all the unpleasant details of your divorce with friends and family members who wish to remain neutral; that way they don’t feel so compelled to take sides. You need to talk about your anger and frustration, but some of those who are close to you may not be the appropriate outlets.
• Be aware that you will have friends who may choose to be friends with both of you. You may find yourself angry or hurt with some for not “siding” with you despite the fact that you may have said, “I understand if you’d like to be friends with both of us.”

• Be prepared for the extra sadness of losing some friends. Some married friends have trouble being friends with a single person. You can threaten their own marriage. Others will gravitate toward your spouse. Some slip away as your lifestyle changes. You may never know why some of your friends just pull away from you.

• Don’t forget to inform other significant adults in a child’s life, such as babysitters and neighbors, who will be supportive of the children and better able to deal with any behavioral changes that might occur.

The only thing harder than telling your kids is telling your parents. The news can be a shock and a tremendous disappointment to them. Parents and in laws may feel deceived or embarrassed. You can tell them as a couple, or individually. It is natural to look to your own family to “take your side,” but think about giving your parents permission to continue their relationship with your ex-spouse and his or her family.

*I felt like a failure telling my parents. I was the first in a family of six children to get a divorce.*—Margaret Leduc, Romulus, MI

*We had two first cousins who married. Their divorce divided the family as everyone had to take sides.*—Unsigned

The breakup of a marriage does not mean that all family relationships must simultaneously and automatically dissolve. If you have been on friendly terms with your in laws, get in touch with them as soon as your decision to separate is final, even if your spouse has already done so,
to lay the groundwork for keeping the doors open.

Remember that your spouse’s parents will always be your children’s grandparents and that their continued relationship with the kids may offer stability in a time of uncertainty, as well act as a buffer when life is stressful for your kids. Unless they are alcoholic or abusive, it’s important to work at letting the grandparent/grandchild relationship grow. Reassure grandparents they will not lose contact with their grandchildren then see that they don’t. A divorce is a loss for them, and most grandparents want to maintain close relationships with their grandchildren. A confident parent will do everything to foster such relationships after divorce.

Let your own parents know what kind of help you want from them emotional (to act as a sounding board), practical (babysitting), financial (school clothes for the kids), or whatever. Some divorcing adult children often have to move home for a time. Be specific in your requests for help. Not all will be accommodated, but don’t be afraid to ask.

“DO I OFFER CONGRATULATIONS OR CONDOLENCES?”

Telling others about your divorce is uncomfortable for them. People don’t know what to say. A quick follow up comment on your part can help put the other person in a better position as to how they can respond. You can say, “We’re separating and (a) I had to ask him/her to leave (b) I was as surprised as you are (c) it was a hard decision but a mutual one or (d) !*&@#)! * @ %! $! “
A LOOK AT THE BRIGHTER SIDE

As difficult as this transition will be, there are certain advantages that you will experience along the way. On your darkest days keep these in mind:

• You have crossed the biggest bridge—that of change. The fear of impending change is often worse than the change itself.
• Your house will be quieter. If there was constant fighting and exposure of raw emotions, this will end. You will no longer be walking on eggshells. Your home can become a haven and a refuge rather than a place you’d rather not be. You won’t be criticized or traumatized.
• Family relationships will be simplified. You’ll have less covering, less coping to do.
• If you’ve lived with the unpredictable behavior of a spouse who’s chemically dependent, your life will become more stable.
• You’ll discover, to your delight, you are really not so worthless after all!
• Single parenting means doing what you want to do, rather than what you thought you “should” do in conjunction with your spouse. If you don’t care if the toys get picked up today or not, now it doesn’t matter. You can also get that pet your spouse was allergic to.
• Circumstances may push your kids into becoming more self-sufficient and responsible. The result might well be increased self-esteem.
• You’ll have time now to develop and rekindle same-sex friendships, especially those your spouse never cared for.
• Decision making and creating your own style can become habit forming and even rather pleasant. You can eat what you like, travel when and where you wish, and budget according to your priorities.
The Decision to Separate

- You will discover a whole new world of things you are quite capable of doing for yourself and by yourself.
- You can sleep in the middle of the bed, watch TV as late as you like, get crumbs on the bedsheets, and use the bathroom in privacy anytime you want (unless you have teenagers, that is).
- Your closet space will increase.

**AND THE NOT SO BRIGHT SIDE**

Before your family reorganizes, it will disorganize. Adults usually underestimate the difficulty of this transition and the length of time often several years before there is enough new stability to provide comfort and a renewed sense of future.

Divorces aren’t always entered into by two cooperating people, so divorces aren’t always smooth for parents or children. One parent can’t “do” a divorce alone. This translates to: You won’t always be able to make it best for your kids, despite how much understanding you have and how many terrific communication skills you possess. All you can do is your half and keep reciting to yourself the Serenity Prayer.

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Serenity Prayer
Grant Me the Serenity to
Accept the Things / Cannot Change,
The Courage to Change
the Things / Can, and
The Wisdom to Know the Difference.
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Lots of little things will fall to you alone, now. You’ll be the last one turning off the lights at night. You’ll be taking out the garbage yourself, for example, rather than sharing duties with a spouse. There are many harder things you will encounter:
• Facing your financial future alone will be scary in the beginning.
• Your lifestyle will probably change. Single parent families or the divided resources of a family with joint custody often cause a drop in income, which can and usually does place an added stress on the children.
• Your spouse may not be comfortable sharing parenthood because of feelings of loss of control real or imagined. Unfortunately, there are also parents who do not care about cooperation, sharing, or being supportive.
• A competitive parent may carry this trait over into a divorce so that power and winning on one or more fronts may become a major part of your divorce.
• There’s no one to share good news with.
• The new aloneness can be painful for a long time. (Times does temper this, however.)

Litigation, fair representation, and fair play in divorce are not always possible when money is limited. And not always then, either. For adults, divorce can exhaust, demoralize, bankrupt, and alienate.

FOR CHILDREN, THERE IS SELDOM A BRIGHTER SIDE TO A DIVORCE.

WHEN WE ARE FLAT ON OUR BACKS, THERE IS NO WHERE TO LOOK BUT UP

R W Babson