

4



Family Support Agency

# We are separating – What do we tell the children?

Family Mediation Service

Telling the truth of the impending separation or divorce is practically the most difficult event in the separation process. Children of any age are perceptive and aware of tension, sadness or anger. They overhear conversations and see pain in their parents' eyes. It is scary for a child to sense that something terrible is happening in the family and no one will talk to them about it. When there is no communication, a child struggles to make sense out of what is happening by filling in the gaps with their own imagined explanations. Usually a child's fantasy can be worse than any reality. Children can handle the truth when it is told to them by someone they know and trust. They may find out the truth from someone else, and feel betrayed and isolated within the family.

## How do we prepare ourselves?

- Work through some areas of concern beforehand: (i) Are you feeling guilty or anxious? (ii) Are you feeling abandoned or relieved? (iii) Are you blaming and want to get even? (iv) Are you concerned about crying? (v) Do you have expectations as to how the children need to respond?
- Discuss together what you will say to the children.
- Discuss together how you might respond to their reactions.
- Agree that you will not argue with each other or contradict each other in front of the children.

## When should we tell them?

- Do not tell the children you are separating until the decision is final. They cannot cope with the uncertainty and insecurity of not knowing what is happening.

- Choose carefully the time to tell the children - most children remember it for the rest of their lives.
- Pick a time when no-one is in a hurry to go elsewhere.
- The physical setting is important. The place should be familiar and free of distractions. You want to create an atmosphere in which the children will be comfortable in sharing their thoughts and emotions.
- The amount of time each child needs to adjust to the news depends on their age. A couple of weeks before you separate may be an approximate guideline. Older children may need more time.

## Who should tell?

- If possible, tell the children together. It is important that they hear the same information from both of you.
- Follow up with each child individually over the next day or two giving them time on their own with each of you to discuss and share their feelings.

## What if we cannot tell them together?

- It is vital to discuss what they will be told, who will tell them and when.
- Agree how you will each talk to the children and repeat the same message.
- Do not blame the other parent.
- Do not criticise each other.

## What do we tell the children?

- As a parent it is vital that you remain non-judgmental, speak calmly and clearly during this conversation. Remember you are sharing very painful news.

- All negative comments, stories or accusations of their other parent should not be mentioned. If children ask a question about the other parent, the listening parent needs to defer answering to the other parent. If the parent is unavailable, abstain from speaking for or about him/her.
- If the children ask what has happened to the marriage, answer simply while keeping in mind the age of the child who is asking the question. A response that is truthful, yet not accusatory, can be "We have grown in different directions and living together is too difficult. We believe it will work better if we do not live together."
- If there has been a history of abuse or addiction in the relationship those facts need to be told in a caring way. These need to be explained as emotional illnesses. Keep in mind that it hurts children to hear negative things about their parent.
- The children must be told repeatedly that a separation/divorce will not change the fact that parents are forever – and you will both always love them.
- Begin by talking about events the children may have already noticed i.e. arguments, tears, sleeping in separate rooms. By beginning with facts the children have already experienced, it is harder for the children to deny the impending reality.
- Assure the children that the separation or divorce has nothing to do with them. Most children developmentally believe that the world revolves around them. Therefore they may believe that if they had achieved better grades at school, or cleaned their room, or not argued with their siblings, this painful event would not be happening. Children want to believe their parents are perfect and may be quick to edit out their failings/mistakes.
- Make sure your children understand the word "separate", particularly as friends may say "your parents are separating".

## Anything else we need to say to the children?

- Tell your children how sorry you are, that you know this is upsetting for them.
- Be as specific and confident as possible about future plans and living arrangements. Let them know they will be informed about changes that concern them.
- Encourage the children to ask questions. If there is a question that is too personal or painful to answer, honestly explain that to them. Ask them for some time to think about how to answer.
- Tell your children you are there for them and they can talk to you at any time about what's happening. Encourage them to talk and make sure you keep listening.
- Encourage counselling and/or support groups for the children. Be a role model by attending groups yourself.

## What happens if we cry?

- It is appropriate to cry with your children. While you are surrounding your children with a calming protective atmosphere, you can certainly convey your deep sadness. Your children will watch how you grieve this loss. Acknowledge your sadness and your children's sadness. It is a time of loss for everyone.
- Acknowledge also that the child may feel angry, and that it's OK to express that anger.

## What reactions should we expect?

- Each child may respond differently; some may take it lightly or shrug it off, or respond in total disbelief and anger.
- Your child may be upset, or may pretend she/he doesn't care. Allow time for the child to process the information, to adjust and to express any feelings.
- There is no standard way to respond.

## Who else should I tell?

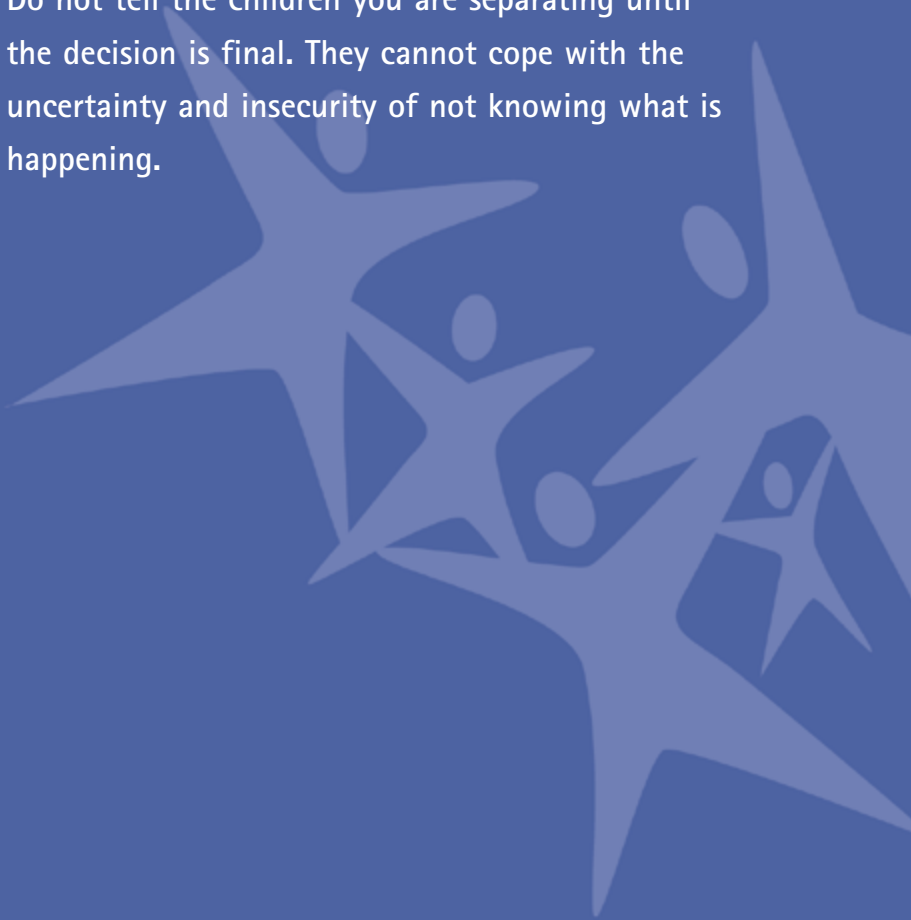
- It is important that teachers, child-minders and other key people in your children's lives should know, so that they can support the children.

*Reproduced and adapted with kind permission from Rainbows "The Single Symphony" by Susy Yehl Marta.*

# We are separating – what do we tell the children?

No parent wants to give their children news that will be painful to hear. However, your children need to hear from you that you are separating, and they need to know that you will be there for them.

Do not tell the children you are separating until the decision is final. They cannot cope with the uncertainty and insecurity of not knowing what is happening.



The Family Mediation Service is a state run service staffed by professionally trained and accredited mediators. It was set up in 1986 and now operates under the auspices of the statutory Family Support Agency. There are 16 offices located around the country.

Full-time offices are located in the following cities:

#### DUBLIN

St. Stephens Green House,  
Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2.

Telephone: (01) 634 4320 Fax: (01) 662 2339

#### LIMERICK

3rd Floor, Riverpoint, Lower Mallow Street, Limerick.

Telephone: (061) 214310 Fax (061) 312225

#### CORK

Hibernian House, 80A South Mall, Cork.

Telephone: (021) 4252200 Fax: (021) 4251331

#### GALWAY

Ross House, Merchant's Road, Galway.

Telephone: (091) 509730 Fax: (091) 567623

*For information on the location of other offices, please contact one of the above numbers or visit [www.fsa.ie/familymediation](http://www.fsa.ie/familymediation)*