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Telling the Kids

Today, we know a great deal about the powerful healing effects of a meaningful “narrative” on children who have suffered a destabilizing shock. There is even research to suggest that kids who come out of such events – an earthquake, for example - with a cogent story do better emotionally and psychologically than kids who are left with a story that doesn't fit together, or worse, no story at all. The shaping, with your children, of a positive story of the “earthquake” of divorce is not just a necessary evil that goes with making a change. It is an important protective tool, and can be an important element in managing the effects of the divorce on their development.

The day you tell your children about your divorce will probably be etched in their memories for life - this is true for many of the adult children of divorce we talk to, and it makes a

lot of sense. Whether the message is entirely unexpected or not, it comes as jolt to a child's sense of a safe and predictable world. If she is like most kids, she will begin immediately to have questions about what happened. The social fabric of the family that has surrounded her is torn. What was destroyed? What remains? Who can she rely on? Where will her life take her now? Depending upon a child's age, of course, much of this questioning may not take the form of a conversation – even an inner one - but may rather show up as a generalized anxiety about her life, her world, and her future.

So, what can you tell your children about this event that will calm their fears, quell their anxiety, and reinforce - rather than undermine - their natural resilience in the face of future difficulty? Well, think about it. What would you or anyone want to know if your world had been radically rearranged this way? You would want to know first, *what has changed*. Equally important, but perhaps less urgent, you would do a thorough inventory of *what will stay the same*. Finally, you would ask the question, *what does it all mean for and about me*.

What Will Stay the Same

#1 - Parents will stay parents. This is the number one fear children have at any age -- and the number one thing to discuss with them. The second most important relationship in my life - my parent's marriage – has suddenly ended. Where does that leave the first most important, my parents relationship with me? My daddy is leaving my mommy, will he leave me too? If my parents can divorce each other, can they just as quickly divorce me?

"We're still your parents. We love like we have always loved you. We will take care of you in all the ways we always have, both physically and emotionally." This is the message that must be foremost in your narrative.

How you communicate this message will depend upon your child's age and emotional maturity – something we'll talk about later in this section. But though a child's overt response can range from tears, to anger, to a cavalier "...whatever, Dad," his future relationship with you is a primal concern for him as he confronts a future where mom and dad are no long together.

This means that you must reassure him now and often in the future. Kids won't usually ask for this reassurance. In fact, after the first few times, they'll probably ask you ease up. But the fact they have registered the information that "Mom and Dad are going to continue to love me as my parents" does not mean it has taken hold in the more primal brain centers, where fear and insecurity tend to call the shots. The earthquake of divorce speaks directly to these centers, imprinting a lesson of insecurity about relationships. Fortunately, this learning can be erased and replaced with a more positive understanding - but it takes a reassuring story combined with extra love and attention and a lot of repetition to do this well.

#2 - Anything else that will stay the same. As we'll discuss in a later chapter, divorce often brings about big changes in kids' living situations. Schedules change. Phone numbers change. Neighborhoods, schools, churches, soccer teams, friends... almost anything in a child's life may change as a result of a divorce. Of course, anything that can change can also stay the same, and be a source of stability. In the course of your divorce, the more elements of stability that you provide your child, the less painful it will be. And this is the time to emphasize these elements, as you paint the picture for your child of her after-divorce existence. "A lot of things will go on just as they have after the divorce. You'll still go to school each day at Roosevelt. You'll still have piano lessons. You'll have a new room at your dad's new place, but we'll fix it up to look a lot like this room. Uncle Manny will still have Friday dinners most

weeks, and we'll be celebrating Christmas with Grandma just like always. And, like it or not, you'll be going back and forth between houses with your little brother, so he'll be with you wherever you are." These last sources of stability, relatives and siblings, can be a very important buffering factor in warding off any abandonment fears or feelings of dislocation in a child. If Uncle Manny is still coming over for dinner, well, that's one more landmark in my world that I recognize, so things aren't completely upside down. And if Little Timmy or Big Sister Sue are going to be always around, just like before the divorce, doesn't that somehow help the world seem more predictable and safe? By the way, the "siblings of divorce" often develop a sense of solidarity and family as their own unit of safety and support. If you find this in your own kids, it something to foster, even though it may feel sad to you to see them relying on each other for this support instead of relying on you.

What Has Changed -- And Why

From a child's point of view, most importantly and most fundamentally, the relationship between his parents has changed. For an adult, the emotional life of a marriage is a constantly fluctuating mixture of feelings: affection, frustration, satisfaction, resentment, etc. For most young children, the relationship appears quite different. It had no beginning that they can remember. It has been the most constant and stable relationship in their lives. This is true even if it has been a rocky one: when parental volatility has been the child's constant companion, then she has little capacity to imagine life without it.

This is about to change, and you need to tell your child in a way that makes sense to him or her. We call this explanation the Divorce Narrative.

Your children didn't cause the earthquake that is about to rearrange their lives. This is obvious to you, but, believe it or

not, it's not so obvious to your children. For the youngest children, there is nothing that happens that doesn't in some manner originate with them. This is because human thinking begins in infancy as a sort of magical fog in which everything is just an extension of me. This narcissistic fog dissipates as children grow up, but it isn't really until the teenage years that kids begin to understand clearly that it's not "all about me". And, as the parent of any teenager will attest, it's still pretty much all about them.

So your children will assume - in either a very literal way for toddlers and early school age or through a more indirect mechanism in older kids - that they are at least part of the reason for the breakup. We have heard a 4-year-old say "I am bad, so my daddy went away." Alternately, a teenager might entertain the thought "My grades weren't good enough, which caused my parents to fight," or "If I had been a better peacemaker, I could have kept them together." In the egocentric world of children, these are stories that, however frightening and painful to them, at least make divorce make sense.

Because these primitive beliefs are embedded in the very essence of a child's worldview, it takes patience and persistence to dislodge them. The best approach, in our experience, includes using the non-blaming divorce narrative, and the constant recitation of the refrain: *this has nothing to do with you... this is not about you... this is just between your Mommy and me.* If your children grow tired enough of hearing this to roll their eyes at you... good, they are beginning to get it.

In addition to reinforcing the belief in your children's non-involvement in the divorce decision, the divorce narrative can be a protective influence through other messages it conveys. Among these messages are the story of your marriage as having once been a loving one, an explanation of the end of the marriage that makes sense to your children, and the fact that,

because your marriage was important to you, you did not let it go without trying.

The marriage was once a loving one. Not only does the divorce narrative help form the child's expectation of his future, it can have a big impact on the way he remembers his past. Cognitive studies increasingly demonstrate that the remembered past can be as malleable as the imagined future: humans interpret and reinterpret their personal history throughout life. Now is the time to reinforce with your child the (accurate) memory that she was born into a loving family environment where she was adored by both of you, and where there was plenty of love to go around. Psychologists call the feeling of being loved and deeply understood as infants "secure attachment", and it's an important contributor to a child's sense of basic trust and confidence during stressful periods as she grows up.

The end of the marriage unfolded in an understandable, even predictable manner. Marriages don't just end with a sudden, unexpected bolt from the blue. Significant family relationships are too important, too strong, and too resilient to allow such a thing. This is what you are communicating to your children when you give them a brief explanation of how the marriage ended. "Though your Dad and I loved each other for many years, we have not been getting along with each other for some time, and we've decided that we need to divorce." The picture painted here (accurately) is one of two people strongly committed to each other and to the family, who over time lost the ability to make it work. "After trying for a long time, your Mom and I have decided we are unhappy together and shouldn't be married anymore." If your divorce can be experienced by your children as coming out of an orderly process that they can understand, then your child's anxiety about other earthquakes coming out of the blue can be minimized.

We tried hard. Most couples struggle hard and long before giving up on their marriages. They struggle with conflicting

values, cultural forces, in-laws, financial disagreements, career conflict and a million other obstacles before admitting that the marriage is over. These struggles are part of the story, too. “As you know, we've been fighting a lot lately. We have tried hard to get along better and to heal our differences, but we just can't seem to. We are very, very sad about this, but we have finally decided to divorce.” This is both an explanation of the divorce and a relationship model for your child to internalize and carry into adulthood: while two well-intentioned people can enter into a marriage in good faith, it doesn't always work out. Before you give up, though, you give it everything you've got.

But what if only one of us is giving up? This is a very tough question, and different experts have different ideas about it. Our idea, coming out of our practice, but also out of our priorities for children, is this: if you can possibly do it, take that secret of who initiated the divorce – who wanted it – to your graves with you. No one needs to know, and it's no one's business but your own. Your children, particularly, may be further confused by this information: “so *Daddy* is the one who doesn't love us enough to stay.” Or, “so something is wrong with *Daddy* and me that *Mommy* doesn't love us anymore.” In either case, the children are left to work out emotional dynamics that may cause them to feel insecure.

Yet, we realize that the desire to tell your children that *it wasn't you who left the family* is sometimes too powerful to resist. If this is the case, then a narrative can still be scripted that does the minimum of finger pointing and blaming. “Your Dad has been unhappy living with me for awhile, and we have both tried very hard to find a way to make it work. Trying hasn't helped, though, and after a long time, we have both decided to end the marriage and live apart.” Remember, this story is for your children's benefit, not yours. In our practice we have seen many parents who have trouble agreeing on almost everything

else, yet still show the strength and wisdom to create a non-blaming divorce story for the benefit of their children.

In addition to the calming effect of a coherent narrative on your child's current emotional state, the message you convey of past stability and commitment to making a marriage work can have a lifelong influence on your child's confidence in his own ability to sustain a relationship and enjoy stability in future family environments, including any future families that you may create, and the families your child creates for himself.

"We are very sad about this". Should you let your children see your emotions during the divorce? We encourage clients to take a common sense approach to this. Your children are going to have their own set of feelings about the divorce – upset, sadness, grief, anger - any or all of these feelings may come up. For them to see you crying or hurting makes their feelings more normal and acceptable. In addition, your sadness reflects the importance to you of this union that produced your children, and provided a nurturing home environment for them to grow up in until now. Your sadness, like theirs, is part of the deep fabric of human relationship that will go on connecting you, even after the divorce. It can be both comforting and reassuringly intimate to share your sadness and tears – and theirs – at this moment of momentous change in their lives.

At the same time, one of your biggest tasks as a divorcing parent will be to manage your emotions for the benefit of the children. Rage, vengeance, blaming, contempt – these are emotions you may well feel toward your spouse both now and after the divorce. These emotions are natural, but they are emotions that will harm your children and, equally important, your mutual relationship should you decide to share them with your kids. Now is a good time to start the disciplined practice of keeping your kids "out of the middle." In a similar vein, if your relationship style with your children has been more restrained than openly emotional, now is probably not the time for an uncon-

trolled expression of sadness. If you feel overwhelmed by grief and desperation at the thought of your impending divorce, this may be a good thing to talk over with a close friend or a therapist, rather than expressing it to the kids.

More about change. For most families, the kids' living arrangements are radically rearranged after divorce. We talk about what arrangements might be good for your family in the chapter on "Parenting Plans". But aside from creating a healthy plan, *describing* that plan in a clear, detailed and positive manner is one of the most important ways to reduce the stress of this stressful event.

Be clear – kids under stress are easily confused. If your children are younger than 10, changes that come about in a divorce can seem especially sudden and confusing. They often make assumptions and draw conclusions that to an adult seem absurd, but from a child's perspective (remember, *it's all about me*) are entirely natural. "Daddy's moving to a new apartment" (*far away where we'll never see him again.*) Be concrete and explicit. "Daddy's moving to a new apartment downtown near his work. We'll drive by there this afternoon and show you just where it is. You'll have your own room there... let me show you a picture of some furniture we think you might like." Painting a picture of your life, your spouse's life, and your children's lives after divorce will go a long way toward alleviating their anxiety

Describing the parenting plan. You may not have an explicit schedule for your children graphed out at this point. Even if you do, it may be best to give the more detailed explanation in a second conversation after your child has had time to process the first. What is important immediately is for your child to have some picture of his future to hold onto: "you will be spending lots of time with both of us every week" or "you will be spending a lot of time with your mom when you're not here with me." Your eventual goal in describing your post-divorce

parenting schedule (whether this is achieved in one conversation or several) is to provide your child with the most precise, detailed roadmap you can (for example, a big refrigerator chart showing just where the kids will be tonight, tomorrow, and next Thursday). Almost all children want this picture and will be reassured by its completeness – to say nothing of helping them stay organized and oriented in their new two-household existence.

If the changes to your children's lives are extensive (you will be moving to a new home several states away, with the children spending summers with Dad and the school year with you in your new home), then the levels of uncertainty and stress will go up, so giving your kids a clear picture becomes even more important.

Remember that, while telling your kids about difficult changes can trigger sadness or anger in the near term, big life transitions happening unexpectedly, without warning, can have a more traumatizing effect upon them, reiterating and reinforcing further whatever shock they've suffered as an effect of the divorce itself. You may have little or no control over the big changes in your children's lives right now, but you have great power to manage and moderate the impact of these changes by the way you introduce them in your narrative.