

KEY ELEMENTS FOR FAMILY-DIVORCE STORY: Bridging Children from the Past to the Future

Children need a clear, cohesive, blame-free story that lets them know that they came into this world in a context of love, and that love remains, even while the marriage/union between their parents does not. Kids also need to know that their parents' love for them persists, even while the marriage does not. Remember, how your child sees you treat the parent of the same sex as the child's gender is often how your child will expect to be treated by his/her future partner. Allow the story to value each parent's strengths, and to free the kids from being obligated to sign up to blame one parent. When one parent feels grossly mistreated, it is *not* always easy to generate a blame-free, shared-responsibility divorce story. What we know is that children who have been involved in blaming one parent out of loyalty to another parent, usually "wake up" later feeling used by the blaming parent.

Seek the help of a licensed mental health professional (co-parenting specialist) to help you co-parent in ways that keep your children out of the stress and turmoil they feel when they are caught in the middle. The clarity of this family-divorce story helps relieve kids of the anxiety they feel when nothing is explained clearly. Preparing and sharing the story offers an opportunity for the kids to respond, ask questions and have their own feelings about the divorce/separation with both parents supporting them. This in turn offers hope for a future where both parents care and consider the children's needs. It may be ideal to have a therapist present who can help support the children's full self-expression with the parents, while supporting the parents' ability to stay on track without provoking one another. Many divorcing parents hire therapists specializing in such matters to combine their disparate stories, and to help them to eliminate any judgments/blame from the content.

1. Talk at an age appropriate level for your children. Use "I-statements."
2. Start with how we met. Recount fun, loving experiences shared.
3. Recount how we were two separate people, with separate interests who came together out of love and respect. Share when/how we decided to join our lives and why.
4. Share what we liked/loved/valued and appreciated about each other and what we *still* appreciate about each other. (Get help if needed.)
5. Explain why we asked people to help with the marriage ceremony and preparation (if we had one) or plans to "join" our lives. Talk about the different tasks and needed specialists when we came together as a couple.
6. Share our excitement about having a baby – you, *our* child. Do this for each child. Share what you both value about the child's character (e.g. kind, curious, hard-working, thoughtful, generous, joyful, playful, diplomatic, able to see what's lovable in others even when their behavior isn't so lovable, etc.)
7. Talk about the love we experienced or had then as a family (if we did), and how we will always love/appreciate the other for giving each other such wonderful children.
8. Dialogue about how shared family experiences (IF parents shared any family experiences) were valuable to *all* of us, and how we will always remember them fondly.
9. (Make this specific to your family) Talk in a neutral, nonjudgmental and blame-free way about what things started to change between us (parents) that left us unhappy. Talk about "*our shared responsibility for what didn't work*" when you were together – e.g. assuming things without talking with each other, having difficulties and ignoring them, judging instead of understanding the other's perspective, having different ideas about what's important (values) and not knowing how to talk about these or bridge our differences. Avoid detailing the specific differences between you when this risks devaluing and blaming your co-parent in front of your child (e.g. I value living within a

budget so we can pay our bills, while your Mom spends so much she'll send us to the poor house.). Agree ahead of time on the differences between you and how to describe these in a neutral, nonjudgmental way (e.g. We have different ideas about how to spend and save money.) Help your kids know that your divorce is a *joint* decision – something you both created (either directly or indirectly), so they don't feel obligated to choose "sides." When you both take responsibility for the failures of the relationship, *you relieve stress on them*. If you devalue your co-parent, they know that parent is a part of *them* too.

10. We tried to get help from professionals who teach people how to communicate better (if this was true). Even with help we weren't able to work things out in a way that worked for both of us. So, we decided to separate and live apart. This is called separating or getting a divorce.
11. We are not separating from or divorcing *you*!! We will both *always* love you and we'll always be your parents.
12. We have asked people to help us separate/divorce/co-parent because there are so many things to do, just as when we joined our lives. We want to make sure experts help all of us to do this kindly and respectfully.
13. You may have big and hard feelings, and sometimes we will have difficult feelings too. Changes like this can be hard for all of us.

Minimizing and/or catastrophizing the impact of divorce will leave your child feeling alone and/or overwhelmed and guilty for not being able to do anything about your relationship not working. Validate your child's feelings - a sense of loss or grief, helplessness and frustration - when they occur, using a calm, matter-of-fact tone (e.g. "Of course/It's reasonable/It's understandable that you feel sad, mad and frustrated with us. We couldn't figure out our differences despite our best efforts – while that affects *you*, you don't get a say in what happens!")

14. You (the child) will have a coach (child specialist in a collaborative divorce) too, so you can talk about how you feel and what you think, *without worrying about us* – that's *not* your job. We will still be co-parenting together, and talking/sharing about your needs/worries and how to support you as you learn and grow throughout your life!
15. You can ask us any questions at any time. We will let you know about changes that directly affect you, as soon as we know. We will keep our adult concerns, reactions and worries away from you because there's nothing you can do about these. Our problems *are not* your problems - we how our decisions affect you and we will work together to make this as easy on you as we can.
16. Come up with a *blame-free* 3-4 sentence divorce story – a brief "party line" that you can both live with and share with your kids, friends and family. Why? To keep your restructured family embedded in your extended community of family and friends, without their feeling they have to choose sides. Run your stories by your divorce coach/child specialist/therapist/mediator who can help you combine both your views in a blame-free way.

Consider that this short narrative is creating the context that will help everyone to move forward respectfully, while honoring what was. (e.g. We had really different ideas about what's important and we couldn't figure out how to talk about these differences. We tried to work it out by seeing a therapist, and we learned to communicate better. But eventually we figured out that our differences about what's important were just too big to accept. We might be able to accept these differences in a friend, but not someone you are with every day for the rest of your life. And, while we're sad we can't make it work and be together, we're both so glad we had our kids, and we'll work together for the kids' wellbeing for the rest of our lives.")