

How To Share Bad News With Your Children

from the American Counseling Association

Most parents want to protect their children not only from physical danger, but also from the emotional pain that life can bring. While we accept that small hurts will happen -- a disagreement with a sibling or friend, the loss of a toy - we usually believe we're helping our young children by sheltering them from the bigger problems that can occur such as a serious illness, financial issues or marital problems.

Unfortunately, being overly protective can do harm. Kids are usually more aware of bad news than we suspect, but often get the details wrong and may even feel responsible for what has happened.

Most children know when a family is having problems, even if nobody has said anything directly to them. But, kids frequently get the news in bits and pieces that add up to an incomplete, confusing and often frightening picture.

The solution is to share information with your children. No child needs all the gory details of a job loss or a troubled marriage, but should have enough age-appropriate information to feel included and part of something important to the family.

Start by reassuring your children that what is happening is not their fault. Kids are used to being blamed for messing up, and they often assume that when trouble happens, whether it's economic woes or marital strife, it's usually because of something they did.

Reassure your children that you, their parents, are on top of things and are working to fix the problem. Let the kids know it's okay to ask about what's going on, especially if they see you upset, worried, angry or crying. Children feel reassured when they know they can ask questions, get information and feel included.

Of course, how much information you share depends on your children's ages. A young child doesn't understand economic issues associated with a job loss, but will know that you're upset, worried, and acting differently. Older children may need more details, both to keep them from blaming themselves for the problem and to help them prepare for changes that may be coming.

Communicating with your children about family problems or possible changes, should always be one of your first priorities. A child left in the dark is a frightened child.

If you need help, look for books at your library or bookstore on family communications, or talk to your child's school counselor about possible approaches.

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