

The American Counseling Association's "*Counseling Corner*" Weekly Columns

Tips For Keeping Your Children Informed

from the American Counseling Association

Maybe it's a divorce, Dad losing his job, a seriously ill family member. Are these things that you want to share with your children?

Many parents try to protect their kids by holding back on bad news, trying not to share the emotional pain that life can bring.

Unfortunately, doing so often does the child a disservice. He or she may grow up with a faulty perception of marriage and family life, and a distorted picture of how the real world works.

Most children, even fairly young ones, are often more aware of problems than we realize. They overhear discussions and recognize when a parent is sad, upset or acting in unusual ways. They hear people talk or see things on TV that let them see how troubled the world can be.

When children get news in bits and pieces it can leave them with a poor understanding of what is happening. When children see Mommy and Daddy are unhappy, upset, angry or worried, they will often assume the worst and think it must be their fault.

Instead, children benefit when they are informed, in an age-appropriate manner, about what is happening. They don't need to know all the sordid details of relationship problems, bad work environments or the loss of a job, but they should have reliable information if what's happening is going to impact them. If information isn't shared, again the kids often assume the problem is their fault.

How much to share depends on the child. Most younger children don't need to know all the details, but it's important to let your child understand that he or she is included, that the problem isn't his or her fault, and that as parents, you are doing your best to handle the issue.

Share such information at a time when you and your children can sit down together and discuss what is happening without distractions. Allow a child to ask questions and to understand the situation on his or her level. You want to be truthful and reassuring.

Your school counselor, or a local professional counselor, can offer help about the best ways to share bad news with your children, as well as advice on behavior changes that such news might bring.

But whenever a family is facing troubling times, deciding how to communicate with your children should be one of your first - not last - priorities.

"Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcorner@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org.

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