

What to Tell the Children When We Cannot Agree on Why: Constructing a Parenting Narrative

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One of the most difficult tasks facing parents in the early stages of the divorce process is developing a consistent and coherent parental narrative that serves to explain to the children the reasons for the breakup of the marriage. “Why are you getting divorced” is a question that resounds in the ears and minds of parents, often uttered by children, in anger and sadness, out of curiosity and confusion. It is a question that leaves many parents feeling helpless, desperately wishing to do no harm to their children, while at the same time wanting to convey some deeper ‘truth’.

In divorce, my truth is often different than your truth. In the service of telling children the “whole truth” no parent would advocate detailing to children every problematic experience or feeling that they believe lead to the demise of the relationship. Parents always pick and choose what and how much to tell the children. Some parents, with the best of intentions, attempt to tell their children the “truth”, by offering too much detail, too much information that is neither warranted, appropriate nor comprehensible to them. Others, in their discomfort, offer cryptic, overly general information that is equally incomprehensible and confusing.

Oftentimes, when parents talk about “wanting their children to know the truth”, they are really saying they want to make sure their children do not blame ‘them’ for the divorce. In their attempts to protect their relationship with their children, they forget that children want and need to be protected from the private lives of the adults they love and idealize. In their hurt and anger, in their guilt at causing their children pain, in their fear of losing the heart, mind, love and respect of their children, parents too often polarize around their subjective versions of the ‘truth’, and seek alliance with their children to preserve an image of themselves as their children’s protector. In the process, parents often miss an opportunity to talk broadly with

their children about relationships, using the present experience of relationship, change and family transition as a model or template for how human beings negotiate relationships and navigate through both the joys of union and the sorrows of parting.

The following vignette examines the question of what and how to tell the children, and the need for the mediator to help parents resist the temptation to develop family narratives based on their primitive (albeit understandable and normal) negative feelings of rage, betrayal and revenge.

Brad and Tara have been married for 10 years and have two children, ages 8 and 6. Tara immersed herself in the lives of her children and often refused to have sex with Brad, claiming she was too exhausted. After years of loneliness and frustration, Brad had an affair. When Tara discovered the affair, she was understandably furious and felt betrayed. Brad decided he did not want to stop seeing his girlfriend and the couple decided to separate.

When Brad and Tara came to mediation, they had not yet told the children of their plans to separate. Brad had already put down a deposit on an apartment and was planning on moving out of the marital residence within the month. They urgently wanted guidance on when, how and what to tell their two children and the children's grandparents. Tara felt it was important to tell the children and her mother about her husband's affair. She reasoned that "that was the truth," and she "did not wish to be dishonest with the children or her mother." Tara was also very concerned that her children understand that it was their father, and not her, who broke up this marriage.

From our standpoint, one of the first tasks in this mediation was to help the couple articulate, how they envisioned their lives post separation, vis a vis, the atmosphere between them, their co-parenting relationship, and the children's relationship with them. This concrete task is often a handy method that involves parents in a joint constructive project, around that which binds them together for life; the children they both adore. In articulating their vision, Brad and Tara realized they still had much in common both practically and

philosophically. For example, both agreed on the paramount importance of:

- Having two parents who will be active and positive role models in the children's lives.
- Maintaining the dignity of the other parent in the children's eyes.
- Divorcing in a way that maintains each parents dignity in the eyes of their children and community.
- Keeping the children out of the middle of their marital and post-marital disputes.
- Minimizing the stress and conflict the children must endure as a result of their separating.
- Actively helping the children through this family transition and avoiding actions that would disrupt that transition.
- Being honest and truthful at all times with their children.

By making time to jointly develop their vision for a future, these parents could begin (at least for the moment) to transcend their more primitive urges and appreciate that it is in their children's best interest to develop and/or maintain a close relationship with both of them. Despite Tara's hurt and rage, she recognized that it was both disingenuous and reductionistic to describe Brad as simply an "evil and selfish husband and parent". Further, she understood that irrespective of what she might think and feel, to destroy Brad's image in their children's eyes would have devastating consequences. Despite his imperfections and betrayal, he was still a parent the children needed to respect. In the words of a 16 year old whose parents divorced when she was a young girl: "I learned early on, that my parents aren't perfect and are not the superheroes I would love to think them. But in their own way they sort of are cause they worked out their mistakes".

As an aside, when we discuss affairs with couples, we are particularly mindful about not condoning the affair, or the actions of the person who committed the affair, regardless of their rationale. We freely share with couples our belief that affairs are destructive, unequivocal betrayals that diminish everyone involved. But, we also explain, that children, even mature children, cannot be expected to understand the complexities of adult relationships. They do not have the experience or maturity. Though the affair may have been the final straw that

ended a troubled relationship or an immature way of exiting a relationship, most couples would agree (often in less injured moments) that the affair was one of many difficulties that led to the discontent of the couple and the ultimate demise of the relationship.

With the above jointly developed priorities to serve as guiding, organizing principals, the couple broadened their discussion. Despite it being acknowledged as an egregious betrayal, they came to view the affair as outgrowth of the myriad of problems in the marriage and not the sole cause of the breakdown of the relationship. Therefore, when constructing their narrative, they were willing to move beyond describing their breakup as resulting from a single act. Instead, for purposes of developing a narrative appropriate to 8 and 6 year old children, Brad and Tara focused on what the children had seen and, therefore, could make sense of. Their narrative went something like this:

“Have you noticed how angry and short tempered we are with each other most of the time? I bet you are sick of us fighting and wish we would just stop and get along. Have you noticed that even when we are not fighting, there isn’t the warmth between us you used to see? Remember when we saw that couple in the park holding hands? I’ll bet it has been a long time since you have seen us do that. That is because we don’t feel love for each other the way we used to. We are unhappy and have decided we do not want to live together anymore.” Brad and Tara then went on to describe how each child was conceived in love and how their children’s births were the happiest days of their lives. How things changed, through no fault of the children, as sometimes happens in adult relationships but that their feelings for their children will never change. Parents don’t divorce their children. They then went on to discuss with children in very concrete ways what would and would not change in their lives (in terms of their home, school, friends, room, toys etc.) and what the parenting schedule would be. If the children asked directly about an affair or other indiscretion, the parents were prepared to politely, but firmly tell the children that they were not prepared to discuss the details of who did what to whom not because they were being withholding but because they loved their children and wanted them to

have the freedom to love their parents, untainted by the hurts and struggles of their marital relationship.

It is critical for parents to remember that the first discussion with the children is just that; a first discussion and it is generally focused on information, assurances and concrete tasks. Children react very differently to the shocking news of their parents' separation and the first discussion is often altered or shortened depending on the child or children's state of mind. Hopefully there will be many more discussions to follow depending on who the children are, their ages, and their individual responses to the separation. It is in these follow up discussions that the breakup of a marriage presents a challenging opportunity for parents to age appropriately deepen their children's understanding of what it means to be in a relationship; its ebb and flow, its joys and sorrows, the ease and the disruptions, the connections and the loneliness. Parents who are able to set aside their conflict with one another and look at the family from a child's view can construct a narrative about the divorce that is both empathic, assuring, truthful and instructive. It is the complexities and truths about living in relationship that children, will necessarily struggle with as they develop and mature and will hunger to comprehend.

In letting go of revenge, spite and the urge to demonize, parents fulfill an obligation to their children to protect, support and educate. They protect their children from unnecessary and inappropriate information. They support their children's emotional concerns, and the need for their children to retain an image of parents that they can trust and respect. They educate their children about the limits of control and predictability in life and deepen their understanding of partnerships with others. Parents also send a strong message to their children that, despite the emotional pain of divorce and the restructuring of family life, Mom and Dad can still speak from a unified perspective and can create a cushioned container that shields all family members from the loss of dignity and respect.

Thoughtful divorcing parents struggle to find a vocabulary that displays unity in their decision to end the marriage. Proving to children that it was the other parent's fault is generally not a good principal to use as a guide for organizing a constructive narrative that

will serve the best interests of the children. A better guide might be: “what age appropriate truth should we relate to our children that will both help them to make sense out of the chaos and turmoil that has befallen the family and will concomitantly give them a vision of how they will move forward”. Children need to know that though this is an event of immense magnitude, much of their life is still preserved, all is not lost, life will go on, they will laugh again, they are not divorcing their parents, some or most parts of their life will remain the same, there will be a place for their toys, their parents will still love them and be strong enough to take care of them, the break up was not their fault, there will be food on the table. They need to know that they, and the people they love, will survive this, and have hope in a future where they, and their family, can someday thrive again.