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## Answering the Trickiest Questions

Job loss, divorce, disease — they're difficult topics to discuss with anyone, but with kids, special finesse is required. Here, the smart scripts to use

By Valerie Frankel

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One of the prime directives of parenting is to protect kids from pain. Hence, bicycle helmets, the movie-rating system, and immunizations. But what about a different kind of discomfort — say, when they get wind of adult situations like divorce or a serious illness? It may be tempting to fib and spare children the harsh truth, but a) that's sidestepping honesty and b) you won't be equipping your kid to deal with the hard stuff in life. And c) once your little one is more of a midsize to large one, she's going to be too observant to be sheltered from reality. So how's a parent to proceed?

Consider this: "Unlike adults, children don't have a context to put disturbing information into. Well-meaning parents may give kids more info than they can deal with, causing insecurity and anxiety they'd intended to control," says Edward Hallowell, M.D., a psychiatrist in Sudbury, MA, and New York City and author of several books on parenting, including *The Childhood Roots of Adult Happiness*. So you'll want to parcel out the info in appropriate, manageable chunks.

You have to acknowledge there's been a disturbance in their universe, but keep the flow of information to a trickle. "Kids need to

know only what they need to know: what will change in their lives because of the situation and, more important, what won't change," says John Duffy, Psy.D., a clinical psychologist and author of *The Available Parent: Radical Optimism for Raising Teens and Tweens*. "You should discuss things differently with each child, based on his age and maturity and the situation itself."

So when your kid hears about something you wish he hadn't and comes to you asking for an explanation, give him the info he needs — and not a bit more.

Next: [How to talk to your kids about divorce](#)

## Answering the Trickiest Questions: Divorce

By Valerie Frankel

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**The scenario:** Your best friend, Sara, and her husband are breaking up. It's a bitter split. She's been coming by often — in tears — for consolation.

### AGES 8 AND UNDER

"All kids this age really want to know is, 'What does this mean for me? Will my life change?' It's not selfish; it's natural for young children to be egocentric — *Do I have to worry the same bad thing will happen to me?*" says Harold Koplewicz, M.D., a child and adolescent psychiatrist and founding president of the Child Mind Institute in New York City. Stick to the facts about what's happening now and about what will happen in the near future. Also, see the situation through your child's eyes: He might think of Sara only as the mother of his friend Bobby and then be worried about his friend Bobby.

**What to say:** "Sara is OK; Bobby is fine. Sara and her husband are talking about getting a divorce. Bobby knows about it. Sara's sad now, but one day she'll be happy again. She will probably come by more often to talk and maybe cry. You'll still have playdates with Bobby, just like always. Sometimes mothers and fathers have bad

fights, but Bobby's parents are still taking care of him."

### AGES 9 TO 14

Despite having watched princess movies since birth, tweens do not yet have a firm grasp on the concept of romantic love. A young kid might be satisfied by hearing, "They fell out of love," but a tween will go to the next level and wonder, *Is love something you can fall in and out of? If Sara and Charlie's marriage was so flimsy, what about Mom and Dad's?* If your child verbalizes this, you may be tempted to differentiate Sara and Charlie's relationship from your own and to discuss the shifting dynamics in romantic unions. In a word: Don't. You'll only confuse them more. "They just won't get it and may be more confused and upset," says Duffy.

**What to say:** When talking to tweens about romantic drama, make long stories short and muffle your emotions — especially those involving harsh judgment. Keep remarks concrete. Say, "Sara and Charlie are separated now, and they are figuring out how best to move forward. They are both adults, and what they do is not our business, but we do know that Sara needs my friendship now more than ever."

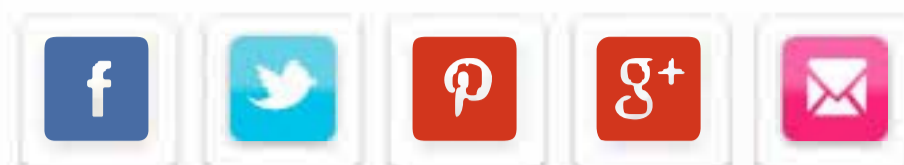
### AGES 15 AND UP

Older teenagers are capable of a more nuanced interpretation, and by now, yours has probably seen a few divorces among her friends' parents. However, "you must resist the impulse to get gossipy with your teenage kids. Even if the details are juicy, you can't count on a kid that age not to follow your example and share everything with all of her friends. [Once she has that information] it's just too big a temptation," says Duffy.

**What to say:** Experts suggest, "We can theorize about what happened, but we'll never really understand because it's their life, not ours." A parent has to model generosity and empathy, not the art of conjecture or how to gossip. If a teen keeps pressing to know whether there's a third party involved — and there happens to be — you can demur and say, "The details aren't clear, and it's not our business anyway. We do know that she is upset. We can focus our attention on her."

Next: [How to talk to your kids about job loss](#)

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## Answering the Trickiest Questions: Job Loss

By Valerie Frankel

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**The scenario: Either you or your spouse has been fired.**

### AGES 8 AND UNDER

"School-age kids need to know what to expect. If they can anticipate change, there'll be less emotional upheaval. Emphasize any potential upside; minimize the downside," says Duffy. "Ease the transition for the child by assuring him he'll be OK and by demonstrating stability. The need-to-know info is that your family will be living differently for a while, but will be OK." Do not freak out or overshare your thoughts and feelings. Your kid should be spared the office-politics horror stories and commentary on a looming mega-depression. Charlotte Reznick, Ph.D., a child and adolescent therapist in Los Angeles and author of *The Power of Your Child's Imagination: How to Transform Stress and Anxiety Into Joy and Success*, warns against ranting about how much you hate your former employer in front of your kid if you were fired. And, she says, "if you show fear or say 'I'm afraid,' a small child might take on some of your anxiety, which can be overwhelming for him."

**What to say:** The experts recommend something like, "I'm home during the day lately because, like a lot of other Americans, I lost my job. I'm already looking for a new one. We'll be OK. We won't buy a lot of new clothes, and our vacation will have to be postponed. It's just a temporary thing we have to get through together." To validate kids' emotions, ask how they feel, and repeat back what they've expressed, e.g., "I understand your disappointment. I'm sad, too, about canceling our trip. But we'll have fun at home."

### AGES 9 TO 14

Kids in this age range are like mirrors. They reflect emotions they perceive. "What you feel, they feel," says Duffy. "If you feel anxious, you can bet they will, too. The way to mitigate anxiety is to stick with the facts." Share that Dad is looking hard for work; the family has some savings; the situation is serious but not grave.

**What to say:** Don't skirt the issue and pretend everything's fine. "The key words are 'realistic' and 'hopeful,'" says Dr. Hallowell. For instance, you could say, "I'd be happier if Dad had a new job, but in the meantime, we'll be realistic about what we can afford. We'll cut back and make do with less. I'm hopeful this period will be over very soon. We'll get through it."

### AGES 15 AND UP

Kids will feel betrayed only if they're lied to. So don't make promises you can't keep or misrepresent what's happening. If you actually can't afford the status quo, don't tell a teen you'll be fine. "Older teens want to feel respected and valued," says Dr. Hallowell. "They'll appreciate frank conversation and should be encouraged to contribute solutions."

"Sixteen-year-olds will want to know if they can help out by getting a part-time job or applying for scholarships when it's time for college," adds Duffy. Hashing over options is more uplifting than crying over the bills (save the tears for your spouse).

**What to say:** "Life isn't always easy, but bad times do make us stronger," you can explain. "As bad as this might seem to you now, it'll be worse if we don't support one another. We will survive. We might wind up better off for having been through this. Let's figure out a few ways to make things better for all of us now."

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## Answering the Trickiest Questions: Illness

By Valerie Frankel

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**The scenario: Your mom has been diagnosed with cancer; she needs surgery and chemo, but the outlook is still dire. You've been on the phone constantly, talking to your parents and the doctors.**

### AGES 8 AND UNDER

Just as the illness will be ongoing, so should the conversation about it. "Don't do a sit-down, put it all out there, and think, *That's done*. Your child will want to be kept in the loop," Duffy continues. "He might listen to the update and go right back to Xbox. But he doesn't want to feel like he's being shut out."

**What to say:** Don't try to hide the truth; do keep the message simple. The experts advise something like, "Grandma is sick with an illness called cancer. She's going to the doctor for treatment. She will have less energy than usual, so we are going to visit her more often. In fact, the next time we see her, instead of Grandma's taking you to the movies, we are going to watch a DVD at her house. But remember, she loves you and wants to talk to you on the phone like always." Also worth noting: Young kids take

things literally. "Be careful of your wording. The classic example of an ambiguous phrase is equating death with 'going to sleep.' A child might become terrified of bedtime due to that expression," says Dr. Koplewicz.

### AGES 9 TO 14

"With terminal cancer, kids this age are better off knowing the truth," says Dr. Hallowell. "You should lay out a plan for how your child can deal with his questions and emotions. The first step is never to worry alone; if the child is anxious, he or she should seek out a parent, teacher, or friend to talk to about it. Second step: Get the facts, even if they're grim. Kids will take comfort in knowing what to expect. Step three is to make a plan, like calling Grandma every evening. This gives the child a focus and distracts him from the (frightening) inevitable."

**What to say:** Stick with the facts, say the experts. You can answer, "Things don't look good for Grandma. But she'll get medicine so she won't feel pain." Empathetic tweens will want to talk about your emotions. Express them like a statement of fact, as in, "I'm upset about Grandma. I'm relieved we have good doctors. I'm happy to be able to help her as much as I can." Encourage your child to express her emotions as well. Open with a simple, direct "What are you feeling?" Repeat often.

### AGES 15 AND UP

Try hard to keep it together, even when talking with older kids. "Make sure you are the parent — the caretaker — and not the other way around," says Reznick. "It's tempting to unload to teens, but no matter how mature they look or act, they are still children and are not there to take care of you emotionally — even if they ask how you feel."

**What to say:** When a teen is facing the loss of a loved one — possibly for the first time in his life — let him talk, validate his feelings, and reassure him that he will be all right. You can say something along the lines of, "I know you're upset. That's normal. I'm here for you whenever you want to talk. And as hard as this is, know that you'll be OK."

Isn't that what anyone of any age really wants to hear? No matter what drama and trauma life throws your way, no matter how many questions your child comes out with, the line of inquiry usually boils down to one big and urgent question: "Are we OK?" Feel free to give the honest, optimistic answer: "We will be."

"All young kids want to know during a divorce is, 'What about me? Will my life change?'"

Kids will feel betrayed if they're lied to, so be honest with them if you lose your job

"With teens, don't unload all your emotions. Make sure you remain their caretaker"

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