

DAD'S TALK: THE END OF THE PARENTS' RELATIONSHIP IS NOT THE END OF DAD'S RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS KIDS



Jeffery M. Leving

When two parents decide to walk away from each other it is an emotional and confusing time for everyone, especially the children.

Despite the often unbearable stress of divorce or the break-up of a relationship, parents must focus on their responsibility to protect their children from the possible devastation of the end of their parents' relationship. The most important thing a father can do to soften the impact on their children is to maintain an active role in their lives. As a domestic relations attorney focusing on representing fathers in custody disputes, I know this confusion period is a difficult time for fathers and they must do everything they can to protect their relationship with their children. The first step

is often one of the trickiest: talking to your kids. Such was the situation faced by this reader.

Dear Jeff:

My wife and I have decided to split-up after more than 10 years of marriage. We have a daughter together named Talia, who means the world to me. As you can imagine, this has been extremely hard and there is a lot of hostility on both sides. I tried for a while to stay at home for my daughter, but I finally left a few weeks ago. When I do see my daughter, she is always happy to see me, but she doesn't understand why I'm not around all the time. Her mother obviously has not told her what's going on and is leaving it up to me to do it. It's my wife's fault we split up, but I look like the bad guy because I left. My lawyer has advised me not to talk to my

daughter about the details of the divorce, but I have to say something. How can I make sure my daughter understands that this was not only my decision without bad-mouthing my wife?

FRUSTRATED FATHER

First, you seem like a great dad and you need to stay involved in your child's life. You are right to be concerned with the child's relationship with her mother, but you also need to be concerned about your own relationship with your daughter. The best situation is one in which both you and your wife talk to your daughter together. Explain to your child that you and her mother love her and the separation had nothing to do with her. You need not go into the harrowing details

of the break up. Whatever truce needs to be negotiated to bring this joint effort about is worth the trouble.

When it's necessary for the father to tell his children the bad news (or "his side of the story") alone, the temptation to blame the spouse is often powerful. Resist. Children often need to respect both parents to develop normally, so for the child's sake, keep your opinions to yourself and shield your child from the conflict. Kids usually become very upset and vulnerable by criticisms of either parent, even if the criticism is valid. They resent being encouraged to take sides. If you are in the midst of a divorce, it could damage your chances for custody if it appears you are trying to alienate your child from the other parent.

Don't get into the "blame game". The most important thing is not who's right or wrong, but that your daughter knows that your decision to break up is not her fault. Make sure she knows that your break up will not

See Leving page 14

Leving from page 11

affect your love for her. Explain that while you may not get to see each other everyday anymore, you'll always be her dad and you'll always love her.

Be hopeful that you can reach a fair custody arrangement with your wife that allows you to continue to see your daughter frequently. However, you will likely have to spend days, possibly weeks at a time, without seeing your daughter. The most important thing you can do to protect your relationship is to stay in touch, especially during these first

few months of separation. Use phone, email, and letters – whatever it takes to let your daughter know that you are still there for her. And remember to keep fighting for your daughter's best interests because she needs her dad.

Jeffery Leving's column appears regularly. Mr. Leving currently serves as Chairman of the Illinois State Council on Responsible Fatherhood. For questions and/or comments about this and other columns, call 312/356-DADS (3237), email to mail@dadsrights.com