

How to Construct a Story

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Children may benefit from stories about their parents' relationship that include the following elements:

1. The narrative should provide a positive blueprint, a story, or family-life tale in which there are no villains or heroes, just essentially humane characters (whether animals or people) who are well intentioned but who nevertheless make mistakes and have very human strengths and vulnerabilities.

2. The story should positively and realistically portray the parents' good intentions, explaining that in the beginning they loved each other and had positive ideals and goals in getting together, marrying, and having children. The story should describe the parents' special qualities and note that these are what attracted one parent to another in the first place.

3. The story should explain concretely that the parents were not able to satisfy each other in some important way, and that for these reasons the parents were disappointed, frustrated, and unhappy. It should show how the parents tried and failed to make the relationship work. Negative personal attributes can be reframed in nonjudgmental ways as value differences between parents or they can be reframed as special, albeit troublesome, capacities in the basic, enduring nature of a parent.

4. The story should name the child's expected feelings and dilemmas as consequence of the parents' divorce and disputes.

5. The story can explain how the child is trying to cope with confusing dilemmas and then show how the problem can be thought about in new ways. Suggest new coping strategies and new moral rules that can guide the child's responses to family dilemmas.

6. Most important, the story should include clearly stated permission for the child to have a continuing relationship with each parent and to love both of them. The most helpful stories will show children how to select the good parts of each parent and how to identify with those parts and see themselves as competent and lovable people.

Many children find that talking openly about their family situations is extremely difficult because it makes them frightened, anxious, sad, or even ashamed. Stories are an indirect way of allowing them to distance themselves enough to think and feel things that they might otherwise try to repress or avoid. For this reason each story needs to be a combination of the concrete and the fanciful. Like a fable, the story should be sufficiently disguised from reality that the child can tolerate what is being said without feeling defensive.

In talking with children, it is not necessary too make explicit comparisons between their situation and the characters in the story. Finally, to be of most benefit, the story must be constructed with both parents' ideas and feelings in mind. In the best of all possible worlds, the parents might try working together on the story. This will require them to collaborate on a symbolic story of their courtship, marriage, and separation, and their shared love for their child.

If this is not possible, a divorce counselor or the child's therapist can help with this task, suggesting symbolic themes or even writing the narrative for the family in a manner that is acceptable to both parents as well as relevant to the child's central concerns.

Older children will be better able to “own the story” if they can help write it. It is especially healing for families when these narratives become bedtime stories that each parent reads to the child.