What to say when your teenager asks if you're splitting up

"My fifteen-year-old heard me and her dad arguing and asked "Are you two getting divorced?" I said "Don't be silly." What should I have said?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Don't be silly. Go and do your homework."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"That's a fair question after what you heard. We had a bad argument, and we're working on it. It isn't yours to fix. If anything big ever changes, you'll hear it from us first."

"Don't be silly" answers a frightened question with a joke at her expense. A fifteen-year-old who heard the argument can tell the difference between being reassured and being dismissed.

What the research found

In a study of 175 US children and teenagers aged eight to sixteen and 327 Welsh children aged eleven and twelve, young people judged different ways their parents might argue. Threats, insults and hostility were judged destructive; calm discussion, support and affection were judged constructive. Apart from calm discussion, those judgements held across both countries, across ages and for both mothers and fathers. The researchers' frame, emotional security, is that children and teenagers read how adults handle conflict to judge whether their family is stable.

A separate study of teenagers whose parents had divorced found that those who felt caught between their parents, for example asked to carry messages or take sides, reported more distress. That is a reason to keep a teenager out of the middle even when she offers to be in it.

What the words do

"That's a fair question" treats her as old enough to ask it. "We had a bad argument, and we're working on it" is the truth in one sentence, without the other parent's faults. "It isn't yours to fix" takes away a job she may be quietly taking on. The last line is a promise you can keep, about telling her, not about the outcome. If you don't know the outcome yet, don't invent one.

An argument that involves hitting, threats, breaking things or anyone being afraid is not an ordinary disagreement, and the words on this page are not enough for it. If anyone is in danger, contact your local emergency services; the support page lists crisis lines.

If you live in two homes

If you already live apart, the question may be about the arguments between homes, not a separation. The same rules hold: tell her the truth in a sentence, never ask her to carry messages or take sides, and keep disputes about money or schedules where she can't hear them. Research with teenagers in divorced families found that feeling caught between parents went with more distress.

In the UK

In England and Wales, a child arrangements order may set out who a child lives with and when they spend time with each parent (older orders say "residence" and "contact"). Cafcass in England (Cafcass Cymru in Wales) advises the family court about what is safe for children; for everyday parenting questions, Coram Family Lives (England and Wales, 0808 800 2222) is free and confidential. Nothing on this page is legal advice.

Sources

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This is general information drawn from published research and pediatric guidance. It is not medical, psychological or legal advice. If you are worried about your child, talk to your doctor.