

Of course planning financially for the end of your life is not a pleasant endeavor—but it is one of the most loving things you can do to ensure that your family is prepared. If your family members are in the dark about your intentions, they may make incorrect assumptions, potentially creating family conflict.

Fortunately a straightforward conversation can help clarify your wishes and cultivate good feelings among family members. Here are some suggestions for making estate plan conversations as clear and productive as possible:

Lay the groundwork.

Rather than telling your family that you'd like to talk about what happens when you die, consider framing the discussion as a way to make smart financial decisions as a family, suggests Fran Miller, professor of economics at Boston University. "No one will balk at having a conversation about working toward the best possible financial results for everybody," Miller notes.

Pick the right time.

It can be tempting to use holiday gatherings as the springboard for a discussion of family finances. Think twice, though—celebrations can be stressful and emotionally charged. Bringing sensitive subjects, such as estate planning and end-of-life care, into the mix can stir up people's emotions even further.

Instead choose a time and place in which family members will be free to focus on the discussion at hand. For example you might plan a summer picnic, with a few hours dedicated to a discussion of family finances and end-of-life care.

Be open and honest.

You may hope to minimize family conflict and avoid hurt feelings by simply not discussing sensitive topics such as the way you intend to distribute your assets. However, a frank discussion actually is the best way to avoid future conflict among your heirs—even if the conversation is uncomfortable in the short term.

If your estate plans include particularly sensitive situations, such as inheritances that are split unevenly among your children, you may wish to ask a financial advisor, attorney or mediator to serve as an impartial facilitator.

Cover the essentials.

When the time for your family discussion arrives, aim to give participants a general sense of what to expect in years to come. Adult children should know whom you've named to be your will's executor, as well as where to find important financial papers. You also might give them a general idea of how much, if anything, they may inherit, which may be important as they make their own financial plans. And explain the rationale behind any other significant pieces of your estate plan such as the establishment of a family trust or major charitable donations. Ultimately this conversation can help ensure that your family understands your wishes—and is in the best position to carry them out.