



## Guide: How to Talk to Children About Separation and Divorce

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Children, as well as parents, feel the stress and confusion of separation and divorce. Many kids feel angry, sad and frustrated about the prospect of their parents splitting up for good and are uncertain about what life will be like after divorce. Your ability to communicate successfully with your child, meet their needs for safety and support, take care of yourself, and maintain a civil relationship with your ex will have a positive effect on your child.

Putting your children first when you're separating or getting a divorce can seem like a tall order, especially if the breakup of your marriage is full of conflict. But remember, you're the parent. You have a responsibility to your children to tell them in as caring and as sensitive a manner as possible. You also have an obligation to provide them with all the love, attention, and support that they need throughout your separation/divorce so that you can minimize any emotional trauma that they may experience. If you don't, research shows that they may struggle as adults to lead happy, well-adjusted lives.

### What Your Child Needs

1. I need both of you to **stay involved in my life**. Please write letters, make phone calls, and ask me lots of questions. When you don't stay involved, I feel like I'm not important and that you don't really love me. Please stop fighting and work hard to get along with each other. Try to agree on matters related to me. When you fight about me, I think that I did something wrong and I feel guilty.
2. To help me cope with all this change, **I need as much stability and consistency as possible**. Try to agree together on what the expectations and routines of my life will look like, no matter which one of you I am with.
3. I want to love you both and enjoy the time that I spend with each of you. Please **support me and the time that I spend with you**. If you act jealous or upset, I feel like I need to take sides and love one parent more than the other.
4. Please **communicate directly with my other parent** so that I don't have to send messages back and forth.
5. **When talking about my other parent, please say only nice things, or don't say anything at all**. When you say mean, unkind things about my other parent, I feel like you are expecting me to take your side.
6. Please remember that **I want both of you to be a part of my life**. I count on my mom and dad to raise me, to teach me what is important, and to help me when I have problems.

### How To Tell Them About Your Separation/Divorce

1. If possible, **make plans to talk with your children before any changes in the living arrangements occur**.
2. **Agree on what you both will say**. Take the time to decide what you're going to say to them. Get your story straight so that you don't contradict one another or send them conflicting messages.
3. **Plan to talk when your spouse is present**, if possible. By explaining your divorce together, you convey to your kids that, although your marriage may be ending, you can cooperate as their parents. They still have a family—just a different kind of family. You both will remain actively involved in their lives. Such behavior is

very calming and reassuring to them.

4. **Communicate in a way that is appropriate for each child.** If your children have significant disparities in their ages, maturity levels, or emotional needs, talk to your children individually about your divorce so you can tailor an appropriate message for each child and provide him or her with as much support and comfort as he or she may need after hearing your news. If you meet with your children separately, tell each child that you're having a similar conversation with his or her siblings. If your children are close in age and maturity, telling them all together has important benefits:
  - It can help foster a "we're all in this together" attitude among your children. That feeling can be a comfort and a source of strength to them.
  - If all your children find out about your divorce at the same time, each of them knows exactly what his or her siblings know. This may not seem important to you but, if you tell each of your kids separately, they may worry that they don't know what their siblings know or that you're going to treat them differently than everyone else in the family.
5. **Be respectful of your spouse** when giving the reasons for the separation. It is important to be honest, but with a focus on *your role* in this decision. Avoid blaming. Do not be critical of your spouse in front of your children. Depending on the age of your children and the reason for divorce, this may require some diplomacy but your goal should be to protect the bond between your spouse and your children, no matter how broken things have become in your marriage. *This is about them, not you.*
6. **Answer their questions.** After you tell your children about your divorce plans, give them an opportunity to ask questions. Let them lead with any questions they may have, but don't feel you have to cover every detail during this first conversation. Depending on their ages, they may want to know
  - Where will they live?
  - Will they still go to the same school?
  - Will you and your spouse still live in the same town?
  - Will they spend time with each of you?
  - Will you continue to coach their soccer or little-league team?
  - Can they continue their music or dance lessons?
  - How will you share parenting responsibilities?
  - Can they still go to camp next summer?
  - Will there be enough money?
  - Where will their dog or cat live?
7. **Don't get overly emotional** when you tell your children about your divorce. Watching a parent get very upset can be frightening for children. Don't add to their anxiety with histrionics and overly dramatic behavior. You're likely to make them more concerned about your emotions than their own and, as a result, they may not let you know exactly what they're feeling.

## Provide Reassurance & Comfort

- **Verbal communication:** Beyond reminders that they will be loved and cared for, verbal reassurance should address the reasons for fear, worry, sadness or anger. For example, "I know you are upset about moving, but we will make sure you can stay in the same school."
- **Non-verbal actions:** Children pick up on your manner, expressions and actions almost more than your words. Offer your physical presence and support by hugging your kids, taking a walk, or just sitting down together.
- **Minimal change:** The uncertainty of life after divorce often causes children to worry. The family unit they counted on is breaking apart. In addition to emotional reassurance, physical comfort in the form of order and continuity can also ease their worries. This is not always easy while splitting up into two new households, but it is important. Creating some regular routines in the day and consistently communicating what to expect will provide more comfort to your kids than you might realize. Kids, both young and old, feel more safe and secure when they know what to expect next. This can be about things as minor as dinner time, bathtime and bedtime. Setting up a few established routines or rituals will show the continuity of mom and dad's love and

diminish uncertainty about new living arrangements. Parents should work hard to agree and cooperate in this regard, even if they have disagreements regarding rules and routines.

## How Much Information to Give

Age level should be your guide in determining how much to tell your child about the separation or divorce. Generally younger children need less detail and will do better with a simple explanation. Older children will seek out more information and it will be up to you to share information without saying too much. Be honest. The older ones, especially, probably already know (or have guessed) much more than you realize.

Although the discussion about divorce should be tailored to a child's age, maturity, and temperament, be sure to convey one basic message: **What happened is between mom and dad and does not have anything to do with the kids.** Most kids will feel they are to blame even after parents have said they are not. They may remember times when they argued with their parents, received poor grades, or got in trouble and associate those conflicts with their parents' break up.

Treat your child's confusion or misunderstandings with patience. Reassure your children that both parents will continue to love them and that they are not responsible for the divorce.

## Common Fears & Misconceptions of Children

Understanding the thoughts that may be going through your children's minds can keep you alert to any signs that your kids are having trouble coping with your divorce.

- The parent I no longer live with will leave me forever.
- My parents' divorce is my fault.
- If I am really good, my parents will get back together.
- I have to choose between my parents. I can't have a relationship with both of them after they're divorced.
- My mother's or father's new significant other will replace my real parent.
- My stepbrother or stepsister is going to replace me.