

How to Talk to Children about Divorce or Separation



Talking with your children about what is happening in their family is one of the kindest and most important things you can do for your children. As their family changes, it can help them successfully deal with your divorce or separation. Remember, you are giving them needed information and reassuring them that they will be alright as things change in their family. Please do not put them in the middle of adult issues and make them feel like they need to pick sides.

Think of talking with your children in an ongoing series of small talks, rather than the one "big talk." Your children are going to have questions for you long after the initial separation; and probably long after the legal decisions are final. Be prepared to answer their questions as honestly and carefully as you can. Here are some guidelines to help.

- If at all possible, talk with your children together. Difficult as this may be, it can be important. It is best to hear from both of you at the same time, so as to not hear different explanations or feel that they are expected to take sides with one or the other of you.
- Timing is always a bit tricky, but as a general rule, tell your children approximately 2 weeks before one of you moves out. Longer than 2 weeks leaves your children thinking and hoping that maybe the divorce really isn't going to happen. Under 2 weeks creates anxiety and stress for your children because it will seem to them like one of you has just disappeared. If you are still living together in the house - say in different parts of the house, refrain from telling your children until you know that one of you is moving out
- Pick a time to talk when you and the children are not tired, hungry, rushed or otherwise distracted.
- Tell your children that this is an adult decision that was made. Say this even if it was not a mutual decision. The last thing you want is to draw your children into blaming one parent or taking sides.

- Ask your children what they think divorce means if you are divorcing. Listen carefully to what they say and correct any misperceptions they may have.
- Describe your plan for how they will spend time with each of you. Use language appropriate to your children's ages.
- Plan to talk again in a few days. Avoid a talk where you drop the news and then leave. The last thing your children need is a dramatic scene to deal with.
- After your talk, go about your business around the house so that your children will have time to sort out what you've just told them. Be available if they come to you with questions or just need to cuddle or do something with you.
- What you say to your children will depend upon how old they are and their unique personalities, along with the situation at hand. Use age appropriate language.
- You are the experts on your children and know them better than anyone in their lives.
- Your children need to know that you recognize that this decision you've made is going to impact their lives. Don't be too quick to soothe their feelings until you've really heard what your children have to say.

Some specific things to discuss include:

- **They are loved by both parents** – sometimes kids worry that if their parents can stop loving each other, their parents can stop loving them, too.
- **They will be taken care of** – sometimes kids worry that no one will be left to take care of them.
- **Divorce and separation are adult decisions.** – sometimes kids worry that they may have caused the separation or divorce.
- **They didn't cause it, and they cannot fix it** – sometimes kids think that if they behave, or do all the 'right' things, their parents will get back together again. Again, these are adult decisions.
- **They can ask questions** – sometimes kids worry that asking questions will make their parents sad or angry.
- **It's okay to have feelings and to tell their parents about their feelings, even when their feelings differ from what their parents are feeling** – sometimes kids worry that their parents won't be able to handle their feelings or what they have to say.
- **It's okay to ask for help** – sometimes kids worry that they have to handle everything by themselves.
- **They are not alone** – sometimes kids worry that they are the only ones going through this.

Life will continue to change. You will continue to have conversations about your family over the course of your shared lives.