

# Tips for talking to kids about divorce



Guidelines to consider before you have the "Big Talk."

Once you and your partner are certain that you're going to separate or divorce, you need to begin planning how you will tell your children.

## Shore yourself up first.

Talking about divorce isn't just hard for kids. It's also hard for parents. In the early stages, when feelings of sadness and anger are usually at their strongest, how you manage this first talk is imperative.

Before initiating a conversation with your children, sort through your feelings about how life is changing. Think through what your children need to hear (i.e., when they will see each parent, where they will live, what will change about their day-to-day lives, etc.) and plan how you will responsibly manage your emotions during the conversation.

## If possible, tell them together.

Ideally, it's best if both parents can talk with children together. However, this is only appropriate if the two of you can responsibly manage your own emotions and opinions about the divorce.

In some divorce situations, parents may hold very different perspectives about why things didn't work out or have strong feelings/opinions about the breakup. If talking with children together will create more tension, have separate discussions.

## Make a plan before you talk to your kids.

Whether talking to children together or individually, children benefit from hearing similar messages from both parents. Try to keep explanations simple and avoid placing blame.

## Use general statements such as:

"We've decided we can't live together anymore."

"Over the years, we have grown apart and have discovered we want different things."

"We are a better Mom and Dad than we are a husband and wife (or we are better parents than we are marriage partners), which is why we've decided to get a divorce and live in different homes."

## If you can't agree on what to say.

Sometimes due to your own hurt and pain, you may feel strongly that children need to hear the truth. This is very common when one parent feels wronged, doesn't want the divorce, or is committed to placing blame on the other parent.

Holding one parent responsible for the divorce often creates a confusing and challenging situation for your kids. Placing blame can easily create a loyalty bind for children, which leaves them feeling conflicted and worried about either betraying or rejecting a parent.

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Whether or not you initiated the divorce, try to view the situation through your child's eyes. Children have a right to love both parents.

## Let kids know what will change and what will stay the same.

Address major concerns for children such as:

- When and how will they see each parent?
- Where will they live and go to school?
- Where will the other parent be?
- How will they spend time with important family members?
- Will they still get to be involved in important activities?

If kids have questions you're not prepared to answer, tell them that Mom and Dad are still working out the details. Reassure them that they'll be the first to know when you have an answer.

## Tell children it's not their fault.

While it may seem hard to believe, it's quite natural for children to feel some level of responsibility when parents split up.

Make sure your kids understand that your decision to divorce had nothing to do with them or their behavior.

Additionally, children need to know there is nothing they can do to change what's happening in the family. Also, reinforce that it's not their responsibility to try and make things better between Mom and Dad.

## Make sure kids know they can ask questions and talk about how they feel.

Let children know you understand this will be a difficult change for them.

Reassure them that while things are changing in the family, they'll probably have lots of different feelings.

Reinforce that it's okay for them to ask questions or talk with either parent.

## Don't feel like you have to have it all figured out.

If a question or issue comes up and you're not sure what to say, don't feel pressured to answer on the spot. It's OK to tell your kids you don't know or need some time to think about their questions.

Be sure not to leave them hanging.

If you delay giving them an answer, it's important to circle back (think hours/days, not weeks) and continue the conversation.





## Messages kids need to hear from parents.

- While our feelings for each other have changed, we will never stop loving you.
- We know this will be hard for you, and we're sorry.
- You don't have to pick a side, and you can love both of us.
- Just because we may get upset with each other doesn't mean you have to be upset with one of us. Our problems are not your problems.
- What happened between us is not your fault. You didn't cause this.
- Divorce is a problem between parents. No matter how much you wish or hope, you can't change or fix what's happened in the family.
- We will always be here for you and continue to be part of your life.
- Divorce doesn't end a family. It changes it. You will always have a family. Instead of being a family in one home, you'll have a family with each of us.

## Children's reactions or feelings.

Many different factors impact how children will react to separation or divorce. Some kids will understandably have a very big reaction and feel incredibly angry and hurt.

Others may respond with a profound sense of sadness, while some kids might take the news in stride and show no reaction at all. In families where there has been a great deal of fighting between parents, children may even feel a sense of relief. And within the same family, siblings may have different feelings and experiences.

Most importantly, your children need to hear that their feelings are normal. Be sure to give them the support and space they need to express how they feel safely.

## Initial talk and follow-up conversations.

For initial first conversations, don't overwhelm your children with information. Keep the discussion straightforward and age-appropriate.

Focus on addressing the fact that you are separating or getting a divorce and how life will change for now.

Remember that your kids will probably have additional questions after your first talk and need follow-up conversations.

Follow-up talks don't have to be formal or structured. You may find children are more open to talking during transitional times such as bedtimes, meal times, or while engaged in other activities.



Right now, there's probably nothing  
you want more than for your kids to be okay.

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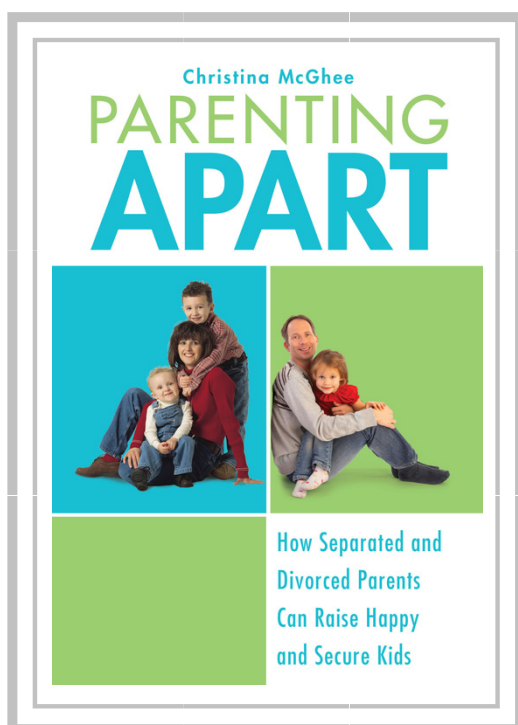
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