

# **How to Tell Your Kids About Your Upcoming Divorce or Separation—10 Tips**

Once you are certain that you and your spouse will be separating or divorcing, it is critical to think about how, and when, to talk to your children. Children often remember this conversation very vividly, and these guidelines will help you prepare yourselves to demonstrate that – as a family – you’re going to meet their needs and answer their questions.

## **1. Work with your spouse to plan what you will say.**

For the sake of your children, put aside the hurt and anger you may be feeling, so that you can make decisions together about the details you’ll need to tell your children. If it’s extremely difficult to speak with one another, consider using the services of a mediator or divorce coach, or invite someone you both trust to help you work out the details. Knowing which parent is going to say what and agreeing that you will support one another in front of the children will make this difficult conversation a little easier.

## **2. Talk to your children together.**

This lets your kids know that you’re both able to work together for their benefit. It’s important that each child hear this news together, and directly from mom and dad; not from the sibling (or anyone else) who heard it first. So if your kids are different ages, plan to share the basic information at the initial gathering, and follow-up with the older children during a separate conversation.

## **3. Develop a non-blaming narrative.**

If you are calm when you tell your children, they will have less anxiety and are more likely to anticipate that they will be ok. Research shows that most healthy children love both parents and that it is unhealthy for the children to “take sides.” So avoid the temptation to assign blame or say whose “fault” this is. To the extent that you can, try to incorporate the word “we” when you’re explaining the decisions that have been made. The key is not to lie, and not to bad-mouth the other parent.

## **4. Provide a general reason for what is happening.**

Your kids will want to know why this is happening. However, it is often unhelpful (and sometimes harmful) to provide specific details about why you are planning a divorce. A general explanation will ease the children’s desire to know, without burdening them with loyalty conflicts or awareness of marital issues that are overwhelming or destructive. Children need to know that they did not cause the problems, nor can they solve them.

## **5. Let the children know what will change, and what will stay the same.**

Your kids will want to know where they're going to live, with whom, and what about their lives is going to change. You can help your children to be prepared for these changes by being honest about what you know, and what you don't know. It is ok to not know all the answers yet, but you can reassure them that you will tell them as soon as you know. Finally, don't make promises that you may not be able to keep.

## **6. Tell them about the parent who is moving out of the home.**

Tell your kids about where the parent will be living and when they will be seeing him or her. They need immediate reassurance that they will be able to see both parents regularly, even though they won't be living under the same roof.

## **7. Reassure.**

The children need to know that the divorce is not their fault, that nothing they did could have caused - or prevented - the divorce. Reassure them that both parents will always love them, even if they are longer in love with each other. If possible, reassure them that both of you will continue to parent them together.

## **8. Let the children react in their own way, and in their own time.**

When you tell your children the news, they may be completely surprised or shocked. Or perhaps they sensed something major in the air. In either case, this development will change their lives. Try to be as understanding of whatever reaction they have, even if they appear to not react. Your children may not know how to express their intense emotions, and it may take time for them to express their feelings. They may express denial, anger, sadness or other feelings. Let them know that all feelings are ok.

## **9. Questions are ok.**

A child usually has many questions, immediately and as time unfolds. Be honest and clear in your responses. If you don't know the answer to a question, tell them that. It is expected that children will want to talk about the changes in the family many times as new questions and concerns arise.

## **10. Continue to reassure, answer questions, and provide information.**

As the changes settle in, your children's adjustment will be strengthened by your patience in allowing them to express their feelings and ask their questions. It is important that you are able to manage your own feelings about the divorce so that you can be a calm, steady, reassuring presence in your children's lives. Be sure that you have a trusted friend or counselor with whom you can express your own feelings, so that you can continue to support your children's adjustment to the new, restructured family.