

Telling Your Children About Your Separation or Divorce

Getting started

- The first important point is to both be present when you tell them and treat each other with respect throughout. If this is impossible, try to co-ordinate when you will each tell the child(ren)
- Think about the timing, a Friday might be good so that you can have the weekend to stick close to them as they get used to the news. Pick a time when you're all at home without interruptions
- Expect there to be some hurt and tears from both sides, that doesn't mean what you are doing is wrong, but it probably won't go smoothly
- Take responsibility for the separation as two adults – try to avoid bringing the children into it – “You are always fighting with Dad too” or “Well what else can I do?” is not helpful. It's your decision, and your responsibility to support the kids through it
- Prepare what you would like to say beforehand, include some special stories and memories you share
- Stay calm and listen to them, don't dismiss their feelings even if they blame you or have a tantrum
- Consider talking to a counsellor, child advocate or mediator beforehand

Keep in mind

- Children want to know what exactly is happening and how things will change
- The more information you can give them about the ways their life will remain the same the better they will generally feel. For example where the dog will live, how the school drop off routine may change, etc.
- There may be questions you can't answer – in this case you can say “Good question, we will give it some thought and all talk about it later”
- Be as honest as you can but don't share unduly painful information such as affairs or financial issues. They will ask for more details when they are ready to hear them
- Encourage them to ask questions, and assure them that they can ask questions later as well – there's no time limits
- Pull in family friends, Aunties etc who might visit the next day and have a walk with them, sometimes they need to talk to others
- Do something familiar like getting a DVD and snuggling up on the couch, they need to have a break from thinking about it

Essentials

- Reassure them that they did not cause the separation – it's common for younger kids to blame themselves (“maybe if I wasn't so naughty last week this wouldn't be happening”)
- Reassure them that they are still loved by both parents. The concept that parents can love their children but not love each other anymore can be a confusing one for younger children and can take time to accept

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Examples of what you could say to assure kids they are still very loved:

- * “We are separating because we are not happy living together, we are happy living with you“
- * “We always have and always will love you very much – we will still be your mum and dad but we have decided to change our living arrangements”
- * “We will still be there when you need us no matter how old you are”
- * Look for positive models they are familiar with. For example: “You know how Jodie goes to stay with her Dad every second weekend, we will arrange something like that and Dad will visit every Wednesday night too”

Calling in the reinforcements

- If extended family or close friends can pay a visit or take the kids out for the afternoon it will make them feel all the more supported
- Make sure you get some support for yourself. You may not regard it as a priority but the best way to ensure your children are managing well is to work through the experience yourself – we all need help sometimes, it’s best to get it early
- See a counsellor for more information. Consider a support group for parents who wish to help their children deal with the changes. **drummond street services** can help – call 9663 6733

More on what to say

- It is common to find that children seem more upset a few days later than at the time you actually tell them. Validate their feelings - “I know you feel sad that we won’t all live together, and you would like us to be together. It is sad, but it will work out, you’ll see”
- You may have to handle their fantasy that you will get back together (e.g. prayers at night for mum and dad to get back together - often trigger feelings of guilt and sadness for parents). Try not to react towards them with anger. Instead say “I know you would like us to get back together, I really don’t think that will happen, but I can understand you hoping for that, things will be ok, we’ll all get through it as a team”
- If one parent says negative things about the other parent or gives false expectations the children will suffer – talk about it up front - “I know she/he said that, but that is because he/she is sad and hurting. They probably don’t really mean that OR sometimes we don’t agree on things. That is not how I see things. This is what I see will happen. And I’ll always be here for you”
- Don’t try to hide your feelings - it’s ok to cry a bit in front of your children and show them you’re sad, but it’s also good to show them how you are coping (this will take time). If the kids see you constantly upset they will begin to worry and want to fix it. Let them know you’re ok - “today I’m feeling really sad about it but I’m ok and it’s nothing for you to worry about”
- If you feel angry towards your ex-partner, it is ok to say “I am feeling angry and need to have a break from talking to him at the moment”, but it is better to avoid showing a lot of anger in front of your children as this may confuse their loyalties and add to their own stress

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- Call on friends and extended family to support you through the inevitable lows, don't lean too much on your children, they have their own worries and grief. Take the attitude that you can guide them through it with outside support
- Finding ways to communicate as best you can with your ex is so important – agree not to use your children to pass information on to each other or present one side of an argument. For example, use a communication book. Or telephone when kids are at school.
- Let them be kids - help your kids to have fun times as much as you can given your stress levels. Help them be kids and enjoy activities rather than carry the weight of the world on their shoulders. Being able to separate temporarily from your own grief and pain and enjoy moments is also helpful. You could see upbeat movies together, go to the beach, have a picnic, or visit friends who are fun.
- Spend quality time with the children - although you may well be flat out trying to keep up with getting a new home set up and coping financially and practically with all there is to do, do take time out to talk and play with the children. Perhaps set aside a time to chat on your bed each morning or evening or cuddle up and read a story. Watching or attending sports with older kids can be a time of closeness too.
- Understanding your kid's behaviour - if their behaviour becomes worse, as it may well, try to be understanding and patient and see it as a sign of the stress and adjustment they are experiencing. Try not to view it as being the "same as" your ex's behaviour and let it act as a trigger for anger in you. Your kids share traits of both you and your ex partner, which is not their fault. Comments such as "you're carrying on just like your mother does" or "I hate it when you do that it's just like your father" are not helpful and can confuse kids who feel loyal to both of you.
- They are children responding to the situation in the only way they know how. They need as much understanding and support as possible at this time. They also need clear and consistent boundaries and rules to help them to adjust (i.e., keep all routines similar where possible).
- Checking in with kids about their feelings and how they are coping - asking kids where in their body they carry their worry, etc. Checking in with how their tummy is going or their head etc. This can open up conversations about their feelings and thoughts. These should be mostly just listened to and validated "I can understand you feeling that".
- Congratulate them on how well they are going and give yourself a pat on the back too. These are hard times but well handled well, children can come through this experience feeling loved and supported. Remember thousands of people with separated parents have lived very happy healthy lives – the fact that you have read this factsheet and are trying so hard to do the best by them means a lot.

The single most responsible, loving thing you can do for your children is to both work towards a collaborative separation – it is hard, but the benefits are enormous for all concerned

