

Emerging Minds Families

FACT SHEET

Talking to your child about separation and divorce

Emerging Minds acknowledges that families come in many forms. For the purposes of easy reading, the term 'parent' encompasses the biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers of a child, as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising that child.

Telling your child that you and your partner are separating or getting a divorce can be challenging – but it's an important conversation to have.





Sometimes parents think it's better not to say anything, to protect their children from getting upset or worrying. But children often see, hear and understand more than adults realise and will make up their own meaning, perhaps even blaming themselves for the breakup.

When parents are separating, children need:

- to be told what's going on and to be listened to
- help understanding or 'making meaning' of what's happening and coping with changes
- to feel secure and cared for; and
- to know that the separation is not their fault.



In this resource:

-  [How and what to tell your child about your separation or divorce](#)
-  [What not to say to children about separation and divorce](#)
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-  [Keep communication open and ongoing](#)

How and what to tell your child about your separation or divorce

It's best to be open and tell your child about the separation; otherwise, they may come up with their own explanations for the things they're noticing. That can make the child more worried or think they've done something wrong.

It can be helpful to tell your child about the separation together with your partner. If that's not possible, try to agree about when and what you will tell your child.

Choose a time when you won't be rushed, and a place you know your child will feel relaxed. With younger children, you might talk while you're doing something else together, like colouring or having a snack. Older children and teenagers often feel more comfortable to talk and open up when you're in the car together and there's no pressure to make eye contact.

If you have more than one child, you might try to have the first conversation all together, where you explain as simply as possible that you and your partner are separating and what's going to happen next. Then make time for one-on-one chats with each of your children, so you can listen to their questions and concerns and provide information that meets their needs.

What you say and how much you share will depend on your child's age and where they're at in their development. It's helpful to plan the conversation before you start and think about the following questions:

How will I explain what's happening?

It's important to help your child understand that you and their other parent are separating and what that means for them – in a way that's appropriate for their age and understanding. You might tell them that you and their other parent won't be living together as a couple anymore, but that you both still care about them and will always be their parents. Explain that they'll have an ongoing relationship with both of you (if that's safe and possible) and what that will look like.

You might want to tell your child why you're separating – if you can do so in a simple way, without blaming or criticising the other parent. With younger children, you might prefer to say that some of the reasons are hard to explain and you know it will be hard for them to understand, but the main thing they need to know is that things are going to be OK. If your child is old enough to understand, talking generally about the challenges of relationships and factors that affect people in them might help them understand why you're separating and the way you're handling it.

What do they need to know right now?

Children don't need to know all the details about why you're separating, but they do need to know:

- where they are going to live
- when they will be with each parent
- if they will have to change schools or other activities; and
- that the separation is not their fault.

What do I most want my child to understand?

Think about what you feel is most important for your child to understand and feel at the end of this conversation. For example, you might want to tell them that it was a hard decision, and that you know it's going to be difficult for everyone in the family.

The most important thing is to make sure your child understands that the separation is not their fault.

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You need to tell kids enough for them to understand what's happening, because they're going to make meaning anyway. They need to understand it's not their fault, and that they don't have to fix it. They need a safe place to be able to say whatever they want to say about it and [know that] everything they say and feel about it is OK.

JOHN, DAD OF THREE

What kind of questions are they likely to ask?

You know your child and the things they're most likely to be interested in or worried about, so be prepared for those questions.

Some common questions kids ask are:

- 'Where will I live?'
- 'Will I have to change schools?'
- 'Will I still see X [someone in their extended family or a friend]?''
- 'Where is Mum/Dad [their other parent] going to live? How often will I see them?'
- 'Is it because I ... [did or said something]?''

For more tips for age-appropriate conversations and ways to connect and communicate with your child when you're going through 'tough times' (like separation or divorce), see these Emerging Minds guides for parents:

- [Communicating with your baby during 'tough times'](#)
- [Communicating with your toddler during 'tough times'](#)
- [Communicating with your primary school-age child during 'tough times'](#)
- [Communicating with your teenager during 'tough times'](#)

What not to say to children about separation or divorce

It's also important to think about the things you should try *not* to say or do when talking to your child about your separation or divorce:

- Try not to criticise, blame or say negative things about the other parent. That can make your child feel upset or angry, or like they have to choose sides, which doesn't support their wellbeing.
- Don't share arrangements that haven't been finalised or make any promises you might not be able to keep.
- Avoid talking to your child about 'adult issues' like financial arrangements or child support.
- Don't put pressure on your child to make decisions or choices – for example, about where they want to live. Young children can feel pressured to choose between their parents or to try to keep the care arrangements 'fair'. It's important to make space to listen to your child's views and feelings and make decisions that support their development and wellbeing.



Allow space for your child to express their emotions

Take a pause and notice how your child seems to be responding to the news or information you're sharing. Ask how they're feeling and if they have any questions.

Children might:

- feel shocked, sad, confused, afraid of being abandoned or guilty
- blame themselves or think it's their fault – that they did, said, or wished something that caused the separation
- be angry with one (or both) of their parents and blame them
- feel relieved if there's been a lot of conflict or tension at home
- feel a sense of loss when one parent leaves the family home
- wish or believe that their parents will get back together
- be worried or uncertain about the future.

Allow and encourage your child to express whatever they're feeling. Tell them it's perfectly OK to feel that way. Holding or hugging them while they cry or just listening while they let out their anger or worries can help children feel safe and supported.

The most important thing right now is for your child to feel heard, understood and cared for.

Answer your child's questions honestly, and if you don't have the answer right now promise to let them know when you do. For example, 'We haven't worked that all out yet, but I'll talk to you about it as soon as we do' or, 'I'm not sure exactly where Dad will be living, but he or I will tell you when he decides.'

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I'd tell my kids, 'Yes, this is a s* situation, this is how we're going to deal with it. What do you think? What do you need from me?' Let them speak. They have a voice from a very early age, they are their own people, we don't give them credit.**

- ANONYMOUS, PARENT OF TWO

Keep communication open and ongoing

Separation is a process that might continue over months or years, so communication in your family needs to be open and ongoing. If you have more than one child, making time for one-on-one chats with each of your children gives them space to share their thoughts and feelings. It will also give you an opportunity to tune in to any individual concerns or challenges coping that they may be having. Whole family conversations – between you and all your children – are also important. Often siblings react in different ways, and this can create tension between them. It's important to help your children understand that no-one's feelings are wrong and it's normal for people to have different perspectives.

Over time, and as they grow up, children's understanding and adjustment changes too. There may be times when your children want more information and will ask different questions about the separation than they have before.

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Because my kids were a baby and a three-year-old [when we separated], we couldn't have those conversations about, 'Well, where did Dad go?' But as they got older, they started to notice friends at school have got Mum and Dad at home.

AMANDA, MUM OF TWO



It can be difficult to talk about your separation or divorce with your child – but being open with them helps them feel secure and connected to you. Listening to your child and answering their questions helps them understand and make sense of what's happening in their world.

Look for regular opportunities to talk with your child, without being too annoying or forcing them to chat if they don't want to. Use these moments to check what they're thinking and feeling, particularly to make sure they're not blaming themselves for the separation or changes that have come with it. And show them you're optimistic about things getting better and better in the future.

Further resources

Check out the following resources for more information on supporting children through a separation or divorce:

Looking after yourself during a separation or divorce



Parenting after a separation or divorce



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