

Talking to Children About Divorce

Hearing the news that parents are separating commonly causes children to become anxious and frightened. Just as you are, they are concerned about how the separation will change their lives. Here are some suggestions for helping your children through this difficult time.

- Both parents should tell the children together. Discuss and agree ahead of time what you will say. Telling your children together gives them the positive message that you are still working together as parents.
- Help your children understand that they did not cause the separation. Tell them that you and the other parent are separating because you do not get along and will be happier living separately. Children may blame themselves. Reassure them that the decision relates to the parents relations, not to them.
- Children want to know how their lives will change. Stress consistency and focus on those important aspects of their lives that will not change, such as remaining in the same school, having the same friends, and extra-curricular activities.
- Discuss immediate changes. It is not necessary to project too far into the future. Talk about living in two households and assure them that they see each parent frequently.
- Let them know that they do not need to choose between parents or households. Assure them that both parents will continue to care for them, although in two different households. They may ask how often they will see the other parent. If you have agreed to a parenting plan, share the plan with them. Otherwise, let them know that each parent will continue to be part of their lives and available to them.
- Give them time to ask questions and talk about their feelings. When will they see the each parent? Will they stay in the same house and school? Some children will not be able to process the news immediately. Encourage them to feel free to talk and ask questions afterwards.
- Remember that as a parent, it is your job to protect your children from the damage of divorce. Do not treat them as your therapist or as a friend. Do not discuss the details of the divorce, the causes, financial concerns or the legal issues. Providing too much information may be disturbing to them. Children should be shielded from the divorce process.

In traveling down the path towards separation, think about the characteristics you would like your children to have, such as resilience and caring, and demonstrate those same characteristics to your children. Your children will take their cues from you. If you act with strength, self-awareness and intelligence, they will learn those same coping mechanisms. Your actions can help them through the separation emotionally and provide them with reassurance that this difficult time will pass. Remember, take care of yourself physically, emotionally and spiritually so that you can take care of them.