

Communicating With Children When You First Separate

Prior to separation, parents can go through a lot of conflict in their relationship or marriage. While it is not appropriate to share details of conflict with children, it is important that they are properly informed once the decision to separate has been made and is final. Below are some guidelines.

Agree on what to say

Prior to talking to your children, both parents should sit down together and agree on what they will say.

Both parents together

It is a good idea for both parents to tell the children together. It is also helpful to have individual conversations with them at later stages.

Pick a good time

Choose a good time to talk and make sure you have enough time to be with the children after breaking the news.

No blame

Give a clear message that the separation is in no way the fault of the children and that there was nothing they could have done to stop it.

Reassure

Reassure your children that although you are separating, you will still be their parents. The conflict is between you, the parents, and not between parents and children.

Remind them they are loved

Tell you children that both parents love them and will always be a part of their lives.

Practical arrangements

Tell the children where and with whom they will live, where the other parent will live, and what the arrangements for ongoing contact with both parents and the extended family will be.

Give it enough time

Check whether the children have questions and give them plenty of time to chat. Be prepared to listen to them and to answer the same questions again over the next days, weeks and months.

Explain the reason for the separation

In simple age-appropriate terms, without blaming either parent, explain the reason for the separation. For example:

- *'You may have noticed that we have been arguing a lot recently and we have decided that it's best if we don't live together anymore.'*
- *'Mum and Dad don't love each other in the same way that we did before and have decided to separate.'*

Telling others

The children will need to manage the process of telling others (e.g. friends at school). Parents should help them think through how they want to do this and what they can say. Parents should give a clear message that it is not a secret or something that the children should be ashamed of. It may even be helpful to draw on examples of children they know whose parents are also separated to help normalise the situation for them.