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When you need to tell your children you're getting a divorce

THE SITUATION

It's time to tell the kids that you're separating or divorcing.

THE OUTCOME YOU WANT

To let your kids know what's happening in a way that best supports their needs.

HOW TO RESPOND

This is one of the hardest conversations you'll ever have, and you want to be prepared for it. Ideally, you'll decide when and where it happens, but if your kids are older, that's not a guarantee. It's wise to plan now, because you could be caught off guard, either by your partner or maybe a child crying or leaving the room.

What and how much you say depends on several things, including your children's ages. But there are a few universals:

- Keep it short and give the basics: who is moving out, where they'll live, and when they'll see the other parent.
- Assure and reassure them this is not their fault and your love for them has not changed.
- Don't cast blame. Tempting as it may be, don't tell your kids who wanted the divorce or whose fault it is.
- Be a unified front. Part of preparing also means asking your spouse to participate. Tell him/her what you want to say and ask for their input. The best message is a consistent one.
- Tell your children where their favorite things (pets, toys, cars) will be.

THE SCRIPTS

Here are sample scripts by age range. Remember this is a range and you have to judge the maturity and emotional level of your own child.

UP TO AGE 5

Mommy and Daddy aren't going to be living together anymore. You, Mommy, and Scout are going to stay here. Daddy is going to live in another house. I'll take care of you when you're with me and Daddy will take care of you when you're with him. We made a calendar for you to know when you'll see each of us. We'll both always be your parents and we love you so much.

Little kids like to refer to the nights until they see the other parent as "sleeps," so you could tell them "you'll see Daddy after 3 sleeps."

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Mom and I have decided not to be married any more. You didn't do anything to make this happen and we both love you very much. We've decided that the 3 of us will live here and Mom is going to get an apartment down the street. You'll still see her all the time and she can drive you to school. And you can talk to both of us on the phone or FaceTime whenever you want. You're each going to have your own bedroom at Mom's, and you can help pick out what you want for your rooms.

MIDDLE SCHOOL / TWEENS

We have decided to get a divorce. We both love you so much and don't want to hurt you. This isn't because you and your sister got in a fight last week. You didn't do anything to cause this. Sometimes spouses have different opinions about marriage. We have tried to work on our problems with counsellors, but we have decided that staying married is not what is best for us or for you. I'm going to move out in 2 weeks once my new house is ready. Then you'll spend a week with each of us at a time. You can have your phone with you at whichever house you're at, and we'll make sure you have your softball gear

when you need it. We know this is a lot, so if you have questions or worries you can ask us.

TEENS

You may have noticed that we've been arguing a lot. We've tried our best to work it out, but we can't. We've decided that we can't stay married anymore. This isn't your fault - it's not about anything you or anyone else did. We both love you. We're still figuring out the schedule that will work best so your school and activities do not need to change, and we promise to talk to you about it as soon as we do. We know a couple of your friends' parents are divorced and you hear a lot about it at school. If you want to ask us any questions, we're here to talk to you about it. Please do not hold your feelings inside and talk to us about what we can do to help you.

THERE'S MORE

This is the first conversation with your kids about divorce, but it won't be the last. So, check out "what to say when your children ask for details" below. Also, we highly recommend speaking to a child psychologist about how to handle the specific questions your kids may ask you.