

We Skoolhouse

Seperation/Divorce





Navigating Conversations About Separation or Divorce with Your Children

Separation or divorce is one of the most challenging experiences a family can go through. It brings a wave of emotions for everyone involved, especially the children. As parents, the way you handle these difficult conversations can significantly impact your child's emotional well-being and adjustment to the new family dynamic. It's a delicate balance of providing honest information, offering reassurance, and being sensitive to your child's developmental stage and emotional needs. Navigating the conversation about separation or divorce with your child requires thoughtful preparation and sensitivity. Here are practical steps to guide you through this important discussion:

Plan the Conversation Together

If possible, both parents should be present during the initial discussion. This demonstrates unity and reinforces the message that despite the changes, both parents are committed to supporting the child. Planning together also ensures that both parents are on the same page regarding what information will be shared and how it will be communicated.

Expert Advice: "Having both parents present during the conversation about separation or divorce can help reassure the child that they are loved and supported by both parents," suggests Dr. Alan Ravitz, a child psychiatrist specializing in family dynamics. "It shows a unified front and helps maintain stability during a time of change."

Choose the Right Time and Place

Select a comfortable, private setting where your child feels safe and won't be interrupted. This allows for an open and honest conversation without distractions. The timing should be when your child is likely to be most receptive and when both parents are available to provide support and answer questions.

Expert Advice: According to family therapist Dr. Jennifer Harstein, "Choosing the right time and place is crucial. It sets the tone for a serious but supportive conversation. Avoid discussing serious topics in public or during hectic times like mornings or bedtime."



Keep It Simple and Direct

Use clear and simple language appropriate for your child's age and developmental stage. Avoid unnecessary details that could confuse or overwhelm them. Explain the changes in a straightforward manner, focusing on what will directly impact their daily lives.

Expert Advice: Dr. Robert Emery advises, "Keep explanations simple and direct. Use language that your child can understand without overloading them with complex information. For younger children, you might say, 'Mommy and Daddy will be living in different houses, but we both love you very much and will still take care of you.'"

Avoid Speaking Negatively About the Other Parent

It's crucial to refrain from speaking negatively about the other parent in front of your child. This includes indirect and rude comments about the other parent. Encourage open communication and validate your child's feelings about the situation without placing blame. This helps maintain a sense of emotional safety and stability for your child during the transition.

Expert Advice: Family therapist Dr. Linda Mintle emphasizes, "Never badmouth the other parent to your child. It creates confusion and distress. Instead, foster open communication where your child feels safe expressing their emotions. Focus on co-parenting positively and maintaining a respectful relationship."

Be Prepared for Reactions

Children may react in various ways, from tears and anger to silence or questions. Be patient and validate their emotions, letting them know it's okay to feel sad, confused, or upset. Reassure them that their feelings are normal and that you are there to support them through this difficult time. It is also normal for young children to not have much of a reaction and seek to keep on playing or resuming what they were doing before. This is because the concept is very hard to grasp and they won't "feel" what these words mean until the move occurs. For older children, they may need some time to process and may come back at a seemingly random time with questions or concerns. Be prepared for any type of reaction as children process information and experiences in different ways.

Expert Advice: "It's important to be prepared for a range of reactions," advises child psychologist Dr. Elizabeth Berger. "Give your child time to process the information and assure them that their feelings are valid. Listen actively and be empathetic to their emotional responses."



Be Honest & Age Appropriate

Dr. Robert Emery, a professor of psychology and director of the Center for Children, Families, and the Law at the University of Virginia, emphasizes the importance of honesty in discussions about separation or divorce. "Children need to know what's happening, but in a way they can understand. It's about finding a balance between being honest and keeping it age-appropriate" (Emery, 2016). This means tailoring your explanation to your child's developmental level, ensuring they can grasp the situation without feeling overwhelmed or confused.

Infants and Toddlers (0-3 years)

Infants and toddlers are highly perceptive to changes in their environment and the emotions of their caregivers, even if they do not understand the concept of divorce. At this stage, the focus should be on maintaining routines and providing a sense of security.

- **Example Phrases:**

- "Mommy and Daddy will be living in different houses, but you will have your favorite toys and your own bed in both places."
- "We both love you very much and will always take care of you."
- "Sometimes Mommy will take you to the park, and other times Daddy will, but we both love spending time with you."

These phrases emphasize continuity and reassurance, helping to soothe any anxiety stemming from changes in routine and environment.

Preschoolers (3-5 years)

Preschoolers are beginning to understand more about their world but may not fully grasp the complexities of relationships. They often see the world in very concrete terms and need simple, clear explanations.

- **Example Phrases:**

- "Mommy and Daddy are going to live in different houses so we don't fight as much as adults. We both love you very much, and you did nothing wrong."
- "You will have two homes now. Sometimes you will stay with Mommy, and sometimes with Daddy, but you will still see both of us a lot."
- "Even though we live in different places, we are still a family, and we both love you very much."

These explanations help preschoolers understand the changes without placing blame or creating confusion about their role in the situation.



School-Age Children (6-12 years)

School-age children can understand more complex concepts and may have many questions about the changes occurring in their family. They need honest, straightforward explanations and reassurance that they are not to blame.

Example Phrases:

- "Mom and Dad have decided to live apart because we think it's best for our family. We will always love you and be there for you. Do you have any questions or worries?"
- "We are getting a divorce because we have different ideas about how to be happy as married adults, but our love for you will never change."
- "You will have two homes, and we will work together to make sure you are happy and taken care of in both places. If you ever feel sad or confused, you can always talk to us."

These phrases acknowledge the child's ability to understand more about relationships and offer reassurance that they are loved and supported.

Reassure Them of Your Love

Psychologist Dr. John Gottman, known for his work on marital stability and relationship analysis, advises parents to consistently reassure their children of their love during and after a divorce. "Children need to hear frequently that the divorce is not their fault and that both parents love them and will continue to be there for them" (Gottman, 2014). This reassurance is critical in helping children feel secure and valued despite the changes in their family structure.

Infants and Toddlers (0-3 years)

Infants and toddlers may not understand the concept of divorce, but they are acutely aware of emotional tones and changes in their environment. At this stage, physical affection and maintaining a loving presence are key.

Example Phrases:

- "Mommy and Daddy love you so much. We are both here to take care of you."
- "You are very special to us, and we will always be with you."
- "Even though Mommy and Daddy will be in different houses, we both love you very much."

These phrases, combined with plenty of hugs, cuddles, and consistent caregiving, help reinforce a sense of security and unconditional love.



Preschoolers (3-5 years)

Preschoolers are beginning to form more concrete understandings of their world, but they can easily misinterpret events as being their fault. They need clear, direct reassurances of their parents' love.

Example Phrases:

- "Mommy and Daddy love you so much, and that will never change. You are not the reason we are living in different houses."
- "We both care about you very much and will always be here for you."
- "You are very important to us, and we will always make sure you are happy and safe."

Using these phrases, along with consistent routines and affection, helps preschoolers feel secure and valued despite the changes.



School-Age Children (6-12 years)

School-age children can understand more complex issues and may have many questions about the divorce. They need frequent reassurance that they are loved and that the divorce is not their fault.

Example Phrases:

- "Mom and Dad love you very much, and that will never change. The divorce is not because of anything you did."
- "We both want to be there for you and will always support you. If you have any worries, you can talk to us anytime."
- "You are the most important person to us, and we will always make sure you are taken care of and loved."

These phrases, along with active listening and engagement in their daily lives, help school-age children understand that they are loved and supported, regardless of the divorce.

Maintain Consistency and Routines

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) highlights the importance of maintaining routines to provide a sense of stability during times of change, such as a divorce. "Consistent routines help children feel secure and can make transitions easier" (AAP, 2015). During a divorce, children can feel a sense of upheaval and uncertainty, making the preservation of familiar routines crucial for their emotional well-being. Stability in daily activities provides them with a predictable structure, helping them navigate their new reality with greater confidence and security.

Why Routines Matter

Consistency and routines provide children with a sense of normalcy and control, which is particularly important during the disruptive period of a divorce. When other aspects of their lives are changing, familiar routines in daily activities such as mealtime, bedtime, and school can provide a comforting sense of continuity. This stability helps mitigate anxiety and confusion, making it easier for children to adjust to new circumstances.

Creating and Maintaining Consistency and Routines

- **Regular Schedules for Daily Activities:** Maintaining regular schedules for daily activities like meals, bedtime, and homework can significantly help children feel secure. These consistent routines provide a sense of normalcy and predictability.
 - **Example:** If dinner time has always been at 6:00 PM, try to keep this timing consistent in both households. Similarly, maintaining the same bedtime routine—such as a bath followed by a story—can help children settle down and feel secure.
- **Unified Rules and Expectations:** Collaborate with your co-parent to ensure that rules and expectations are consistent across both households. This reduces confusion and helps children understand that, despite the change in living arrangements, the standards of behavior remain the same.
 - **Example:** If screen time is limited to one hour per day, ensure this rule is enforced in both homes. Consistent rules about chores, homework, and bedtime can help children adapt more easily.
- **Consistent Emotional Support:** Beyond physical routines, emotional consistency is vital. Regularly checking in with your child and providing them with emotional support helps them process their feelings and reassures them of your ongoing presence and care.
 - **Example:** Set aside time each day or week for one-on-one conversations with your child to discuss their feelings and concerns. This can be as simple as a nightly check-in before bed or a weekly outing to a favorite park or café.

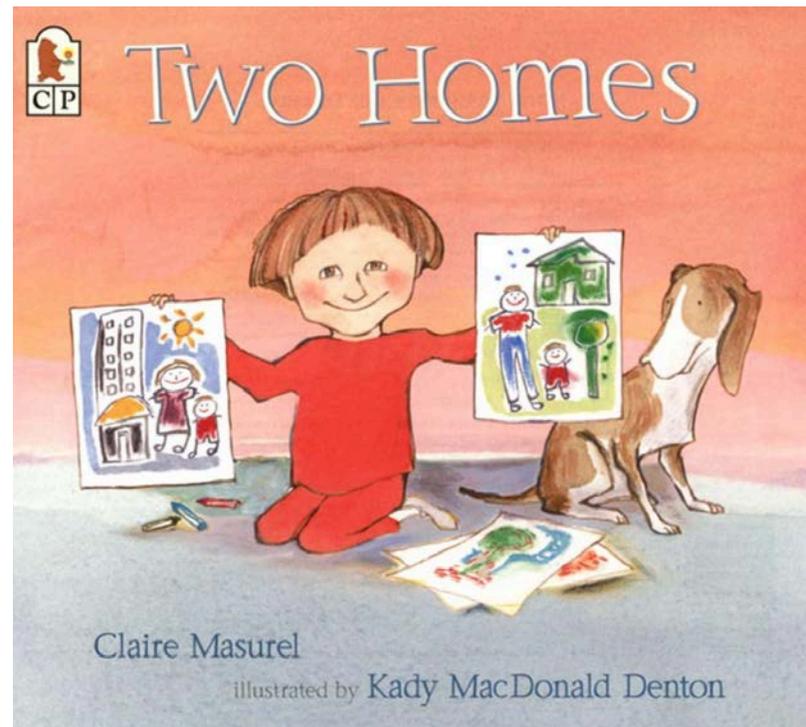
Additional Resources

Navigating divorce or separation with your child can be complex, and sometimes additional support may be beneficial. Here are additional resources to consider:

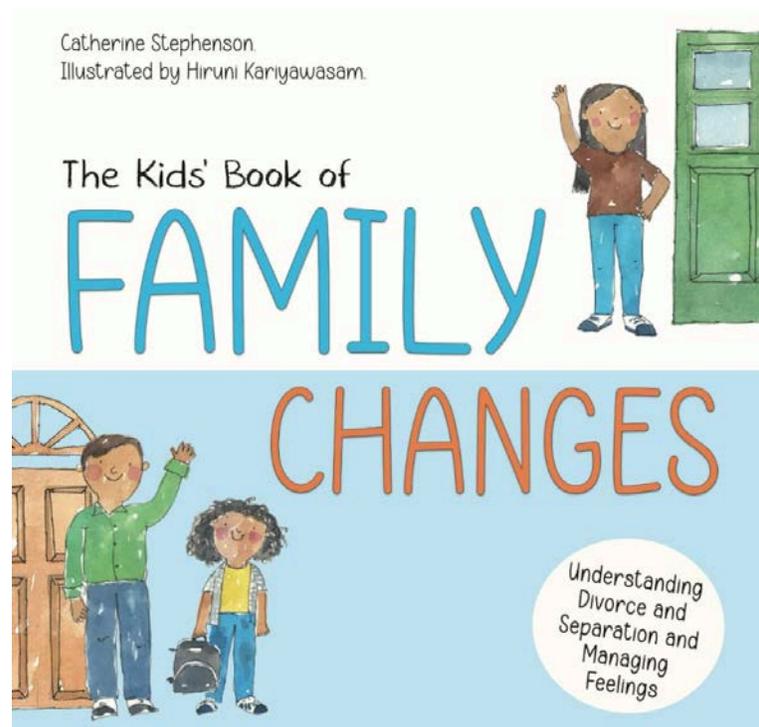
Books for Children

Reading books that address divorce and separation can help children understand and cope with the changes in their family dynamics. These books often use storytelling and illustrations to explore emotions and offer reassurance.

Example Books:



Two Homes, by Claire Masurel



Family Changes, by Catherine Stephenson

Professional Support

- If needed, consider seeking support from a child psychologist or counselor who specializes in working with children and families. A professional can provide guidance on how to support your child's emotional well-being during this challenging time.
- Explore local community resources that offer support groups or workshops for children and families going through divorce or separation. These resources often provide additional emotional support and opportunities for children to connect with peers facing similar experiences.
- Inform your child's teacher so they are informed and engage with your child's school counselor or social worker, if available. These professionals can provide support within the school environment, offer resources, and help facilitate discussions about the changes happening at home.



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