

Talking with children during separation or divorce

Change is hard - for children and the adults who care for them. Even when separation is amicable, children can feel uncertain, frightened, or caught between parents. Their emotional world is shifting, and the words, actions, and reassurance they receive now can have a lasting impact.

This guide, developed in collaboration with Dr. Fiona Pienaar, is designed to help adults navigate these conversations with care, providing practical advice, dos and don'ts, and strategies to maintain security, trust, and resilience during this challenging time.



Why this moment is critical

When parents or carers separate, children experience a major change to their emotional 'home base'.

Even if the split is amicable, it can be unsettling, confusing, and sometimes frightening. This is because:

- **Children rely on family stability for emotional security** - sudden changes to routines, living arrangements, and relationships can shake that sense of safety.
- **The brain is still developing** - children's brains are built in response to the relationships they grow up with. Warm and encouraging words and stable and secure relationships are the essential building blocks all children need to thrive. Negative words and not feeling safe and secure can have an impact.
- **Stress hormones like cortisol can stay elevated** - when a child feels caught between parents or uncertain about the future, making it harder for them to sleep, concentrate, and regulate their emotions.
- **Negative language from adults can leave lasting imprints** - shaping how children see themselves, their worth, and future relationships. Supportive language, however, builds resilience, trust, and self-esteem.



Challenges for children

Many children, regardless of age, face one or more of these challenges:

Self-blame

Children may believe the separation is their fault - "If I'd behaved better, maybe they'd still be together."

Without reassurance, guilt can linger into adulthood, affecting confidence and future relationships.

Loyalty conflicts

Children may feel pressured to 'choose' sides or believe that loving one parent means betraying the other.

This can create deep anxiety and strain relationships with both parents, leaving children feeling guilty no matter what they do.

Fear of the unknown

Worries about where they'll live, when they'll see each parent, or whether friendships and school will change, are common.

Uncertainty can leave children feeling powerless, and fear often shows up as clinginess, anger, or withdrawal.

Loss of routine and familiarity

New living arrangements, changes to school, or less time with one parent can feel like losing control over their own lives

Familiar routines are comforting - when these are disrupted, children may struggle with anxiety, sleep, or behaviour.

Emotional overload

Children are still learning how to name and manage their feelings. A major change like separation can overwhelm their coping skills.

Without adult support, emotions may spill over as distress - like withdrawal, tears, anger, or 'shutting down'. These are signals that they need comfort and guidance, not criticism.



Key tips for positive communication

1. Keep them out of adult disputes

Children should never be the messenger or referee. Shield them from arguments and legal details.

2. Reassure consistently

Repeat messages of love and safety often - consistency helps regulate stress hormones over time.

3. Validate feelings

Naming emotions ("I can see this makes you sad/angry") activates brain regions that calm the stress response.

4. Encourage them to talk to you about what they're thinking

Sharing their thoughts, means you can help them make sense of what is worrying them.

5. Avoid comparisons

Never compare them negatively to the other parent - it damages identity and self-worth

6. Model respect

Even if you're hurt or angry, show them that respectful communication is possible. Children learn about relationships by watching how adults treat each other.

7. Manage what you say - and what you don't say

Ask yourself: "Will this help my child feel loved, safe, or understood?"

Avoid venting about the other parent in front of your child - save adult emotions and conversations for adult spaces.

Keep language age-appropriate and stick to what directly affects them (e.g., living arrangements, routines, reassurances).



What to avoid saying and what to try instead

Avoid saying

These phrases can harm self-esteem, create guilt, or increase loyalty conflicts:

"It's your mum/dad's fault."
(blame may damage the child's relationship with the other parent)

"You're just like your mum/dad."
(said critically, this may leave the child feeling that there's something wrong with who they are)

"Now I have to look after you all by myself."
(may make them feel like a burden)

"You need to choose who you want to live with."
(essentially forces them into an impossible position)

"Don't tell your dad/mum about this."
(divides the child's loyalty and encourages secrecy)

Try instead

These protect self-worth and keep communication open:

"We both love you very much, and that will never change."
(security)

"The separation is between us, not because of you."
(removes guilt)

"It's okay to love both Mum and Dad."
(frees them from divided loyalty)

"You can always tell me what you're thinking and feeling - even the hard stuff."
(emotional safety)

"We're still your family, just in a different shape now."
(positive framing of the situation)

Remember

Children will remember the words you use, what they mean, and how you say them - long after the separation is over. You can't control every detail of the change, but you can control the language they hear - and that language can either weigh them down or lift them up for years to come.