

Nursing children through the split

One of the most difficult things separating parents have to face is telling the children.

While individual temperament has a bearing on how children will receive the news, how they will react depends largely on their age. Each age will require a different sort of explanation to help them cope with the news that their parents are separating.

How well you and your former partner have been working as a parenting team has an influence on how successfully you deal with telling the children. If the two parents can sit down together and tell the children, that is good.

Remember that nobody in the world will ever love your children as much as you, their parents, so it's important to show them the true meaning of what love is by putting them first. You need to explain to them that the separation is not their fault and that they are not to blame in any way.

If you don't do this, children can soon make up their own stories to explain why the separation has happened, and they end up blaming themselves for the split.

Parents should acknowledge to children that they are sad and this is not the way they wanted the marriage to work out. If one parent didn't want the separation, it's very tempting to tell the children that you want to go back, but that the partner won't have you.

This kind of explanation is very distressing to the children, and it's important that you try to put these feelings aside and not burden your children with them.

The explanation of separation should include lots of expressions that you both still love the children, that both parents still care about them and both can still be involved in their lives. It's difficult to explain much verbally to very small children. When both parents have been involved in the care of a baby, that infant will miss the input of the partner who moves out. The major task at this age is to develop a loving and trusting relationship and to continue the bond with both parents.

To a toddler who has some language, you need to explain the situation in language they will understand, because if you don't he or she will make up stories to explain the parent's absence. Suddenly that parent is a dragon off fighting wars, or a very busy prince or princess who will come back one day.

It's important that a young child has a transitional object that can be used as a comforter that travels with the child between parents – teddy bears have a long and proud history of service to toddlers and can be very helpful.

Older children will understand the separation more, but will respond to the parents' behaviour. If Mummy or Daddy is obviously very sad, they will take on the role of comforter. But they still may be very angry at the parent who seems to have caused this distress, and their behaviour may reflect this.

Adolescents might decide to manipulate their parents and insist to one parent that the other parent always allows them to do x, y and z. If you have doubts about this, a suggestion that you call the other parent to check will usually put a stop to this ploy.

Remember that children do not want to take on the anger between the separating parents – they want their parents to love them and be able to talk amicably about their welfare.

No matter what has happened since, they were conceived in love and deserve the loving attention of both parents.

Survival tips

- **Both partners should together tell the children of the decision to separate.**
- **Reassure them that both parents still love them and won't abandon them**
- **Make sure children know that they are not to blame for the separation.**