SUPPORTING CHILDREN THROUGH

Separation or Divorce

What to Say to Children About Divorce

An Age-Based Script Guide

A note before you begin

These scripts are starting points, not rules. Adjust the language to fit your family, your child's development, and what you can truthfully share.

The core messages are the same at every age:

✓ This is an adult decision.	✓ This is not your fault.
✓ You do not need to fix it.	✓ You can love both parents.
✓ You do not have to choose sides.	✓ We will keep caring for you.
✓ You can ask questions now or later.	

1 For Preschool Children

Approximately ages 3-5

Young children need simple explanations, repetition, and concrete information about routines.

Possible script

"Mom and Dad are going to live in different homes. You will have a home with Mom and a home with Dad. We both love you very much, and we will both take care of you. You did not do anything to cause this. On Tuesday, you will sleep at Mom's home. On Wednesday, Dad will pick you up after daycare."

What young children may need to know

- ☐ Who will put me to bed tonight?
- ☐ Who will take me to daycare or school?
- ☐ When will I see the other parent?
- ☐ Where will my favourite toys, blanket, or stuffed animal be?
- ☐ What will happen to our pet?

Helpful phrases

"You will see Dad after daycare on Wednesday.

Your teddy can go with you between both homes.

You can miss Mom when you are with Dad, and you can miss Dad when you are with Mom."

Try to avoid

- Long explanations about why the relationship ended.
- Vague statements such as "Everything will be fine."
- Asking the child to choose where they want to live.
- Assuming one conversation is enough.

2 For School-Age Children

Approximately ages 6-11

School-age children often ask direct questions and may secretly believe they caused the separation.

Possible script

"We need to tell you about an important change in our family. We have decided that we will not be living together as a couple anymore. This is a grown-up decision. It is not because you argued, got in trouble, or did anything wrong. You did not cause this, and you cannot fix it. We both love you, and we will both continue to take care of you. You will stay at the same school, and we will show you the plan for where you will be each week."

What school-age children may need to know

- ☐ Will I still go to the same school?
- ☐ Will I still see my friends and go to my activities?
- ☐ Where will I sleep?
- ☐ What happens on birthdays and holidays?
- ☐ Will I still see both parents?
- ☐ Will we ever live together again?

Helpful phrases

"You can feel sad, mad, confused, worried, or even relieved. There is no wrong feeling.

You do not have to choose between us.

You can always ask a question, even if you have asked it before.

Some things will change, but we will keep telling you what will happen next."

Try to avoid

- Sharing details about infidelity, legal disputes, money, or adult mental-health concerns.
- Saying, "Ask your mother/father why this is happening."
- Using your child to gather information about the other parent.
- Telling your child they must be "strong" for you.

3 For Teenagers

Approximately ages 12-18

Teenagers usually need honesty, respect, and room for strong feelings. They should be included in conversations about how changes affect their lives, without being placed in the role of decision-maker, mediator, or confidant.

Possible script

"You may have noticed that things have been difficult between us. We have made the decision to separate. We know this will affect you, and we want to hear what you are worried about. There are adult parts of this situation that you do not need to carry. You will not be asked to take sides, manage our feelings, or choose between us. We both love you, and we will continue to be your parents."

What teenagers may need to know

- ☐ How will this affect school, work, sports, friendships, travel, and transportation?
- ☐ Will I need to move or change schools?
- ☐ What happens with university plans, savings, or family finances?
- ☐ How will time be divided between homes?
- ☐ Can I have input about routines and practical arrangements?
- ☐ Who can I talk to when I do not want to talk to either parent?

Helpful phrases

"You are allowed to have your own feelings and opinions about this.

We want to hear what would make the transition more manageable for you.

You do not need to protect either of us from your feelings.

We will not ask you to keep secrets, pass messages, or report on the other parent."

Try to avoid

- Treating your teen as a friend, therapist, or emotional partner.
- Sharing private legal, sexual, financial, or betrayal-related information.
- Pressuring your teen to comfort you.
- Assuming they are "fine" because they spend more time with friends or in their room.

A MESSAGE TO KEEP REPEATING

One Sentence Every Child Needs to Hear

Children often need reassurance more than once, especially when plans change or feelings become stronger. Choose a version you can say calmly and repeat consistently.

"This is not your fault. You do not need to fix it. We both love you, and we will keep taking care of you."

My family's version

Write the exact words you want to repeat in your family. Keep them simple, truthful, and steady.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

A final reminder

You do not need to get every word right. What matters most is that children are not asked to carry adult responsibility, choose sides, or manage their parents' feelings. Revisit the conversation as needed and answer questions with honesty, warmth, and practical clarity.

MentalOptimist parent resources are educational tools and do not replace individualized legal, parenting, medical, or mental-health advice.