

Explaining Shared Custody to Kids

Get our expert's best tips on how to explain shared custody to kids of any age. By Kate Bayless



Shared custody, or joint custody, occurs when a court awards the care and guardianship of a child in a [divorce](#) to both parents. The court distinguishes between *shared legal* custody in regard to things like determining activities, academics, and religion, and *shared physical custody*, where the child divides his time between the two parents' homes. Once you and your ex have been awarded shared physical custody of your children, it can take some time to figure out the logistics of a shared schedule. After you've hashed out a plan, it's time to tell the kids. Our experts weigh in on the easiest way to explain shared custody to your kids.

Get on the Same Page With Your Ex

Even if you're on poor terms, try to pull together a unified front to explain the changes to the kids. "It's preferable if parents can tell the kids together," says Rosalind Sedacca, founder of the Child-Centered Divorce Network and author of *How Do I Tell the Kids About the Divorce?* "You want to remind them that they aren't losing Mom or Dad. True, there is a change in the structure and form, but [you] are still a family." If the relationship is too fractured for you and your ex to be in the same room and remain civil, then talk to the children one-on-one. It's important though for each parent to provide the same clear information and reassurances without putting down the other parent, says JoAnne Pedro-Carroll, Ph.D., clinical psychologist and author of *Putting Children First: Proven Parenting Strategies to Help Children Thrive Through Divorce*.

Drop the Drama

Regardless of how you feel, now is not the time to launch into a detailed explanation of why you're getting divorced. "Avoid blaming the other parent. It creates emotional stress on the children when they hear negatives about either parent. The idea that 'Mom hates Dad, but I love Dad' is confusing for them," Sedacca says. Keep in mind that your tone and attitude during the divorce will play a large role in how your children respond. Dr. Pedro-Carroll says it's crucial that parents respect each other and contain their conflict. "Ongoing conflict between parents, especially when children are involved, has a huge negative impact on children's physical and emotional health."

Focus on the Constants

Sandwich the bad news with positive. Start by reminding the kids of what won't change: both parents' love and commitment to them. "How children are prepared for family changes sets the tone for how they respond in the short term and adjust over the long term," Pedro-Carroll explains. "If children get a clear explanation and reassurance from both parents, they feel more secure and loved." It can also help to remind them of the parts of

daily life that won't be affected at all by the divorce such as their schedule with [school](#), friends, and activities, says Debbie Martinez, certified divorce life coach and Supreme Court certified family mediator.

Explain the Change

After you've set the stage by reminding your children what will remain the same, it's time to talk about what will be different. "It is critical to prepare children for the changes they will experience," Pedro-Carroll says. "When they lack essential information, they often fill in the blanks with their own worst fears." The most important changes your children will want to know are where they will be living and when they will see each parent. "Don't get overly detailed unless the child is asking specific questions. You don't want to overwhelm them or create anxiety," Martinez says. Consider using a visual aid, especially for younger children, to help explain the shared custody agreement. "Having a calendar that shows exactly when they can expect to be with each parent is helpful for children of all ages," Pedro-Carroll suggests. "In addition to simply showing the logistics of the plan, a calendar underscores the reassuring commitment that each parent will spend time with them. Color-coded calendars for 'Mom Days' and 'Dad Days' help young children visualize their time with each parent, and older children often find more detailed schedules helpful, particularly if they are involved in activities."

Highlight the Positives--and Stay Positive

After you've explained the change, sandwich the back of the conversation by highlighting a few of the positives. For some kids, the benefit might be that Daddy will be able to come to [soccer](#) games every other weekend or that Mom will now have time to take that art class with them. For some kids, even the divorce itself may be a positive, Sedacca says. "If children have been living with parents who have been bickering and fighting and the kids have been feeling that tension, sometimes the divorce can be a relief for them," she says. "When I got divorced, I told my 11-year-old that Mom is going to be happier living in her own house and Dad will be happier. So when you see us, we'll both be nicer to be around."

Allow Time to Process and Question

While you have likely been entrenched in the divorce proceedings and thinking a lot about the custody arrangement, this may be the first time your child has learned of the divorce and has considered that he'll have to split their time between you two. Give your child time to process the information and understand that he may go through various phases of anger, resentment, sadness, or trying to find ways to get you back together with your ex. Whatever his emotion, keep a dialogue going. "If your child is scared, angry or sad, your most important first--and continuing--step is to keep communication open," Pedro-Carroll says. One way to do this is to ask questions and help your child pinpoint his emotions. Above all, this is the time to listen, Sedacca says, "even if you don't like what you're hearing. You want your kids to feel safe and validated in expressing whatever it is that they are feeling. You want to make your children feel heard."

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