

Clinical Psychologist, David Coleman offers parenting advice in his weekly column in the INDEPENDENT.IE. In this article David offers advice in response to a letter from a parent going through separation.

Dear David Coleman: I'm dreading telling our young children about our separation. Is there a 'best way' to do it?

[David Coleman](#)

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Clinical psychologist David Coleman offers parenting advice in his weekly column.

1. My wife and I have been together for 17 years and have two boys aged nine and four. We're in the process of separating, with me moving from the family home shortly, due to the relationship being irreconcilable, and the horrible, palpable atmosphere in the house. We've agreed to tell our boys soon, but I'm looking for some guidance when it comes to 'breaking the news', as I am sure my wife is too. I've an idea in my head how I foresee it going. Although I'm ready for the possible emotional upheaval, I'm dreading it.

David replies: There are none of us that look forward to sharing bad news, so I can imagine that you are dreading it. You probably anticipate that it will be upsetting, confusing, anxiety-provoking and/or saddening for them.

As I have explained in response to previous queries similar to your own, one of the most important things is that you see telling them about the separation as an ongoing process that may take months. The first time you discuss this with them is simply the start of that process of helping them to understand and make sense of the changes that will happen in their lives.

It does help children, in the early stages, when parents have a clear plan established for how and when the physical separation will occur. It can be difficult, or seem 'not real' to children when they are told their parents are separating, and then nothing actually happens.

So, given their comparatively young age, delay telling them until your plans to move out are definite and you have your new home ready to move into. The separation may only appear to be a real thing for them when they see where you will now be living and when you physically are not around the house with their mum.

There is little point in trying to predict how your boys may react. Since they are at different developmental stages, we can expect that their reactions may differ, but we don't know what specific aspect of the separation will be most meaningful for them.

It will help if you and your wife are able to both be present when you tell them about separating. It will also help that you have an agreed 'story' about why you are separating. For your children, that story can be simple enough.

It is good if the core reason for why you are choosing to be apart will be obvious, or make sense, to the boys. So, for example, if you are explaining that you and your wife think there will be less fighting when you don't live in the same house, it is good that that matches the boys' experience of conflict between you.

It will also help the boys, because of their young age, if you and your wife appear to have the separation 'sorted' – that you are in charge of it and managing it. It helps if you appear to have everything in hand. Their insecurity might be raised if they get a sense that either of you is unwilling, or unable, to cope with the decision to separate.

So, if either you or your wife has doubts or resentments about the separation, it will help to shield the boys from that. If the boys see that each of you is coping with the new plan, it supports them in coping too.

They will take their lead from both of you, including any sense you can give them that you both think this is a good idea and a relief from an otherwise stressful or upsetting situation.

When they first hear the news, the boys may seem to take it in their stride – or may not seem to react, emotionally. That may be an element of shock, denial or disbelief. As that passes and the reality of the separation becomes evident, their feelings may change.

Initially, young children often just want reassurance about the practical details of what will happen.

Will they see their friends? Do they have to change school? Where will they live? What plans are there to spend time with each of you?

Irrespective of what their initial response is, the key to supporting them is to continue to be open to discussing and processing what this separation means for the family, and for each of them individually.

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