

Ideally, start with counseling. You're bound to be angry, and seeing a therapist jointly before you talk to the kids can help you cut through the fury and amicably work out plans for breaking the news and establishing new living arrangements. Parents need to learn to work together without letting their negative feelings get in the way, James said. "The goal is to put the kids 'needs first."

Tell the truth. Give your children only the facts, James said. If you're not sure you're going to divorce, say nothing. If you're separating, say something like: We're not sure we'll get divorced, but we're going to live apart to see if we can work things out. If divorce is certain, tell your kids you haven't been getting along and have decided it's best not to live together any more. If possible, parents should talk to the kids together, but, said James, "more important than who delivers the information is how it's delivered" – truthfully and without rancor.

Understand what "why?" means. When your children ask why you're getting divorced, what they really want to know, James said, is what will happen to them. Explain the arrangements you've made – where they'll live and whether they'll have to change schools, for example. Make sure they understand they will still see both parents. Acknowledge their hurt and – most important, Hulme said – assure them they're not to blame.

Don't fight in front of the kids. "Conflict between parents is, hands-down, the most damaging thing for kids," James said. No matter how much you dislike your ex, keep it between the two of you. Never bad mouth your ex, and never bring the kids 'names into an argument, Hulme added, or they will assume the divorce is their fault. "It sounds easy," James said, "but it is very hard to do."

Make the best of new living arrangements. If custody is split, agree on house rules (with counseling, if necessary). Beyond that, don't make the kids feel guilty for leaving you and don't pry. Instead, reassure them your ex loves them and will keep them safe. Taking favorite items back and forth, like a blanket or stuffed toy, can be comforting, said Hulme. And if drop-off and pickup times trigger arguments, she added, meet at a public place or ask someone you trust to help. "Changing homes is inconvenient and annoying," said James, "but if the parents can get along and be supportive, it doesn't have to cause trauma."

If you're the "poor" parent, don't fret about teenage drama. Yes, your spouse's home may have fancier toys – and your teen may rave – but when they're adults, James said, it is the attachment you make with your children, the loving nurturing you give them, that prevails. Have confidence that you are their rock.

RESOURCES SIDEBAR:

What resources are available for divorced parents? Carol Greenfield, a Sacramento licensed marriage and family therapist, suggested Kids Turn, available online at kidsturn.org. [MeetUp](#) offers informal groups with different themes throughout the area. Local hospitals, including Sutter and Kaiser, sponsor groups, and so do churches and other organizations. Googling turns up a good selection.

Greenfield also recommended some books. "Shared Parenting: Beyond the Great Divide" by Frank Leek, her husband; "Mom's House, Dad's House" by Isolina Ricci; "Dinosaurs Divorce" by Marc Brown, a fun kids' book. James adds Anthony E. Wolf's books ("Get Out of My Life, But First Could You Drive Cheryl & Me to the Mall").