

# Tough Talk: How to Tell Your Kids You Are Going to Rehab



You've made the decision to seek residential treatment for your drug, alcohol or behavioral health problem, but you're reluctant to tell your children. However, not being honest with your children about going to rehab is something most parents later regret.

While the conversation will not be easy, it's best to choose a time when you have minimal distractions and an open-ended timeframe. Some ideas to consider:

**Deliver news in an age-appropriate way.** You wouldn't share the same information with your five-year-old as you would your 15-year-old. The message should be based on their level of maturity and ability to process abstract concepts.

- **Toddlers.** Keep language simple and concrete and avoid unnecessary details. It may be appropriate to say, "Daddy is sick and needs to go away to a place where doctors can help him get better."
- **School Age.** You might approach the conversation by asking if the child has noticed any changes in your mood or behavior, such as, "Have you noticed that mom has been really sleepy or cranky lately?" Explain these changes are tied to an illness called addiction and that you will be going to a safe place where you can get help from doctors.
- **Teenagers.** Be direct and factual. Explain you are sick and have an illness caused by an addiction. Acknowledge the basics of how the addiction has affected your mood, behavior, work or relationships. Explain to your teen that doctors recommend you seek medical treatment in a setting where you can focus on getting better 24 hours a day.

**Give an idea of how long you will be away.** The exact length of your treatment cannot be predetermined but give your kids an approximate time frame (4-5 weeks) based on your conversations with the treatment facility.

**Clarify changes to their routine during your absence.** Kids of all ages need a schedule and predictability to thrive. If different arrangements will be made for their childcare, school pick-up or extracurricular activities, you or a trusted caretaker should explain these changes as clearly as possible. A written schedule or calendar may be helpful.

**Explain what rehab is.** While it's important to explain you will be living in a medical setting and cared for by doctors, also emphasize you will not be confined to a hospital bed or room. It may be helpful to show your kids pictures of the facility that display a variety of treatment settings and activities.

**Explain how you will stay in touch.** Explain the treatment center has rules about how often you can use the phone, facetime or email. Tell your child how often you will try to communicate, but do not make promises. Explain while you would like to stay in touch while away, it is your child's choice to communicate with you or not.

**Ask how your child feels about it.** Give your child an opportunity to ask questions and share how he or she feels about the news you have shared. If he or she expresses anger, fear or sadness, remind him or her that there are no wrong feelings. If your child has no emotional reaction at all, be prepared for delayed reactions at a later time.

**Offer support.** Even young kids need to know who they can talk to while you are away. This may be your co-parent, another family member or a trusted adult in the child's life. Alateen is an organization that offer support groups, education and resources for teenagers who are coping with a parent's drug or alcohol problem.





**IAFF Center of Excellence for Behavioral Health Treatment and Recovery**

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**If you or your child need support:**