

What to tell your children, by age

Tell them the truth in a shape their age can hold — no more, no less. Children read worry in your face before they understand your words.

Preparing and waiting

Educational draft. Clinical review pending. Quotations retained from the original text are not verified member testimonials.

Telling your children about your heart condition or your upcoming procedure is one of the hardest conversations there is — because you're protecting their hearts while your own needs care. The good news: children don't need every detail. They need three messages: "I'm unwell, the doctors are helping me, and you are safe — and it's not your fault."

Principles that hold for every age

- Tell the truth at their level — don't hide it, don't overload it.
- Repeat the core message: "You are not the cause." Young children quietly assume they caused the illness.
- Reassure them about their routine: who takes them, who stays with them, when things return to normal.
- Allow questions and answer honestly: "I don't know" is an acceptable answer, followed by "but the medical team knows, and they'll tell us".
- Tell one teacher or trusted adult at school, so someone is watching over them during the day.

By age

Birth to age 4

At this age words matter less than arms and routine. They need their daily rhythm unchanged and one calm adult. "Papa is tired and the doctors are helping him" is enough. They won't follow the details, but they will catch your fear — so stay as calm as you can.

Ages 5 to 8

They understand illness as a simple idea. Use short sentences: "There is something in Papa's heart that needs fixing. The doctor will fix it, he'll stay in hospital for a few days, then he'll come home." Reassure them: "It's not your fault, and nobody is angry with you." They may ask "Will you die?" — don't dodge it. Answer honestly and gently: "The doctors will do everything to help me. That's their whole job."

Ages 9 to 12

They absorb more and notice contradictions. Give them the core facts: the condition in plain words, what will happen, roughly how long you'll be away, and who will care for them. Ask what they've heard — children pick up wrong versions from adults. Let them take part: a drawing for the hospital, a "how are you today" text. Small participation steadies them.

Ages 13 to 17

Old enough to be treated as young adults. Explain with nearly full honesty: the diagnosis, the plan, the risks in a calm register, and why this procedure is the best option. They may look busy or indifferent — that's often armour. Give them a role: helping at home, coming to an appointment, holding the file. And being in the picture means they won't be ambushed at school or by well-meaning relatives.

After the conversation

Watch for small changes: sleep, appetite, withdrawal, or a return to younger behaviour. These are usually temporary and respond to closeness and routine. If they last for weeks, or fear keeps them from school, tell your team or their paediatrician — they know who can help.

Take it to your team

Ask: is there a trusted booklet or website I can use to explain this to children? Could someone from the team speak to my child if they ask? Some clinics have people trained in talking to children — worth asking before you need it.

Call for help if

These deserve prompt attention: your child refuses to eat or sleep for several days, talks about harming themselves, refuses school for two weeks, or shows intense fear that you will disappear. Tell your team or their doctor directly.

I told my nine-year-old: "My heart needs fixing, like when we fix the car." She said, "And will it be like new?" I said, "That's what the doctors are working for." Then she went back to her game. She'd just been waiting to be reassured.

A last word

There are no perfect words. There is honest presence. Children forgive imperfect sentences — they remember that you sat with them and told the truth kindly. The decisions about your treatment stay with your own team; the message "you are safe, and it isn't your fault" is yours to give, at every age.

Questions to take to my team

☐ Can someone help us explain the operation to our children in an age-appropriate way?

For discussion and personal reference. Your care team's individual instructions take priority. For an emergency, contact your local emergency service; do not wait for a community reply.