

# Tough Talk: Talking to Your Kids About Your Addiction



## Telling Kids the Truth

As a fire fighter or EMT, it's your job to help others. But when you need help for an alcohol or drug problem, asking for help doesn't come easy. And telling your kids you need help may seem downright impossible.

Many children of fire fighters idealize their parents as invincible heroes. The pressure to uphold this image and protect your children from the reality of your addiction may stem from a mixture of love, fear and shame.

If you have made the decision to get residential substance abuse treatment, it may be tempting to lie to your children about where you'll be. However, healthcare experts broadly agree that giving false information to your kids is a misguided approach that will likely backfire.

**It's true that kids need different information depending on their age. But rather than assuming your kids are too young to understand, consider the following reasons why it's important they know where you are and why:**

- **It's not their fault.** Because kids are not fully developed socially or cognitively, they tend to see the world from an egocentric perspective, i.e. things happen because of me, for me or about me. Without a clear explanation to the contrary, children could assume your addiction, your behavior or your need to leave home is somehow their fault.
- **Restore trust.** You are seeking residential treatment because your ability to function on the job or at home has become truly impaired. If you have been physically or emotionally unavailable because of your addiction, the time to restore trust with your children and build a better relationship for the future is now. Being dishonest will only erode that trust.
- **Make sense of addict behavior.** When bad things happen, understanding the why can help us cope. Children, especially, need to make sense of events in their world to feel secure. If a parent is struggling to get out of bed, behave appropriately or meet minimum work or childcare obligations, understanding the parent is sick can help a child make sense of what is going on.
- **Dispel rumors and clarify facts.** If your child is in middle or high school, chances are he or she has already heard, witnessed or learned about substance abuse through school, social media or friends. Sometimes the information that is circulated is sensationalized, not clinically based, dated or simply untrue. Older children may benefit from knowing the prognosis and facts of your specific substance use disorder, while appreciating no two addictions are the same.
- **Model the importance of asking for help.** Kids are smart. Even young children can detect subtle physical and emotional changes that accompany a parent's addiction. By not acknowledging to your child that you need help, you send the message that some problems are too shameful to ask for help and must be dealt with on their own. If your child was coping with a bad break-up, academic problems or bullying at school, would you want him or her to suffer alone or ask for help?
- **Accept responsibility.** As a fire fighter or paramedic, you may use substances to cope with unresolved post-traumatic stress. You may think your addiction is not your fault. Regardless of who or what drives your urge to use, it is your responsibility to deal with your addiction. Being honest with your loved ones and seeking professional help can teach your children an important life lesson to accept responsibility for their problems.





## 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.



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



IAFF Center of Excellence for  
Behavioral Health Treatment and Recovery

For more information, visit  
[www.iaffrecoverycenter.com](http://www.iaffrecoverycenter.com)  
or call (877) 204-1637.



INTERNATIONAL  
ASSOCIATION  
OF FIRE FIGHTERS



**EHN CANADA**

Behavioural Health Treatment for Canadian Fire Service Professionals  
1-888-301-7876