

Explaining a Parent's Treatment to a Child

Children need an explanation they can understand and a clear plan for who will care for them. Start with what they have noticed. Use the examples below as starting words, then answer the child's actual questions.

Keep completed notes private. Use short notes in each box; continue on another copy or separate paper when needed. Save the completed PDF on your device and reopen it to check your notes before closing.

Keep Three Things Clear [1]

- The problem is not the child's fault or responsibility to fix.
- Name the adult who will care for them and explain the next familiar part of the day.
- Leave room for feelings and questions. If you do not know an answer, say what you will find out.

For a Younger Child

Example wording: "Dad is getting help for a health problem. You did not cause it. Aunt Maya will pick you up and stay with you tonight. You can ask me questions, and you do not have to make Dad better." Replace the people and plans with what is actually true.

For a Child Who Wants More Detail

Example wording: "Alcohol has been causing problems, and Mom is getting treatment. Treatment means working with people who help her make changes and stay safer. This is an adult responsibility. What have you noticed, and what are you wondering about?"

For an Older Child or Teen

Example wording: "You may have noticed things we have not explained well. I want to be honest without asking you to manage the situation. Your parent is getting help for substance use. You can talk with another trusted adult, too. What do you need to know about this week?"

Do not promise that a problem will never happen again. Give a return date only when it is confirmed, and explain that plans can change. Say what is known now: who is caring for the child, what routine stays the same, and when you will check in again. These sample scripts are conversation aids, not a required age-based formula.

Make the Care Plan Concrete

What the child already knows or has asked

Their words, concerns and what needs a simple explanation.

Who is caring for the child

Names, phone numbers, school pickup, meals, bedtime and backup arrangements.

What you will say and check next

Only promises you can keep; trusted adult the child can contact; next check-in.

More Support for Children

[Sesame Workshop: parental addiction resources](https://sesameworkshop.org/topics/parental-addiction/)

<https://sesameworkshop.org/topics/parental-addiction/>

[Find treatment help](https://www.addictionhelp.com/find-treatment-help/)

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Sources

[1] Sesame Workshop: Parental Addiction

<https://sesameworkshop.org/topics/parental-addiction/>