

Helping your child at home – 5

Separation & Divorce



Going through a separation or divorce is one of the toughest situations you may ever face as a parent. Not only do you have to deal with the practicalities and your own feelings of hurt, anger and bewilderment; you also have the needs of your children to think about.

Telling your children you are separating

As soon as you're certain of your plans, talk to your children about your decision to live apart. Although there is no easy way to do this, it is important to do this. Wherever possible, both parents should be present for this conversation. It is important to try to leave feelings of anger, guilt, or blame out of it. Practise how you're going to manage telling your children so you don't become upset or angry during the talk.

Although the discussion about divorce should be tailored to a child's age, maturity, and temperament, it is important to reassure your child that **it is not their fault**. Children often feel they are to blame and it is vital for parents to keep providing this reassurance.

Give children enough information to prepare them for the coming changes in their lives. Try to answer their questions as truthfully as possible. Remember that children don't need to know all the reasons behind a divorce (especially if it involves blaming the other parent). It's enough for them just to understand what will change in their daily routine, and — just as important — what will not.

With younger children, it's best to keep it simple. You might say something like: "Mum and dad are going to live in different houses so they don't fight so much, but we both love you very much."

How children's reactions may differ from adults

Children have limited ability to put their feelings into words. Children depend on adults to teach them the language of feelings. "I'm feeling sad". "Sometimes I feel angry", "Are you feeling sad?"

Tell children who are upset about the news that you recognise and care about their feelings and reassure them that their feelings are perfectly alright and understandable. You might say: "I know you feel sad now" or "I know it feels lonely without dad here" lets your child know that their feelings are valid.

It is helpful to understand that children have a limited tolerance for emotional pain. They often feel sad in brief but intense spurts. They may distract themselves by pretending or playing happily. This is normal and does not indicate that they are not upset. Not all children react right away. Let your child know that's acceptable too, and there will be other times to talk when they're ready. Some children try to please their parents by acting as if everything is fine, or try to avoid any difficult feelings by denying that they feel any anger or sadness at the news. Sometimes

Their response comes out in other ways — at nursery, or with friends, or in changes to their appetite, behaviour or sleep patterns.

Whether your children express fear, worry, or relief about your separation and divorce, they'll want to know how their own day-to-day lives might change.

Be prepared to answer these and other questions:

- Who will I live with?
- Where will I go to nursery /school?
- Will I move?
- Where will each parent live?
- Where will we spend holidays such as Christmas?
- Will I still get to see my friends?
- Can I still do my favourite activities?

Being honest is not always easy when you don't have all the answers, or when children are feeling scared or guilty about what's going on. It's always the right thing to do to tell them what they need to know at that moment.

Children do not have our understanding of time and they may not understand that this separation is final, irreversible or certain. Their grief may even be postponed until a later developmental stage.

Look after yourself

Loosing someone important in your life can leave *you* feeling isolated and confused. You may feel you have been forced into a journey for which you have no knowledge or guide. Information can provide you with something like a guide, helping you to avoid pitfalls and unexpected difficulties. Help can be found from a range of sources:

- Books and videos
- Support groups, where you can talk with others who have had similar experiences can help you feel less isolated and alone
- Professional help from a counsellor or psychotherapist can give you more specific individual support. The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy is the umbrella organisation for many counsellors and psychotherapists. (0870 443 5252) www.bacp.co.uk

Different types of support work for different people. For example, some may find support groups comforting; others may find them depressing.

When a child grieves

Many children grieve the loss of the kind of family they had hoped for, and especially miss the presence of a parent and the family life they had. That's why it's common and very natural for some children to hold out hope that their parents will someday get back together — even after the finality of divorce has been explained to them. A child may experience the pain of bereavement as much as an adult, but may not express it in the same way. It is important that adults understand that they cannot protect children from their own feelings when someone close to them leaves - we cannot stop them feeling sad – but we do need to support them *in their* grief.

Children need to have the opportunity to express their grief. They learn to express their grief from the adults around them, so if parents and close family members express their grief and acknowledge it with their child; their children are likely to know how to express their grief too. Equally they can learn to bottle up emotions if that is what they see around them.

Children cannot sustain sad emotions and will suddenly revert to appearing happy and content. Their behaviour has been likened to jumping in & out of puddles. It is important to realise that this does not mean that children are unaffected by their grief.

Children at different ages will respond differently

One of the most important factors influencing how young children, 0-3 adjust to divorce is parents ability to take care of themselves. When parents' needs are met, they are better able to recognise and attend to the needs of their children. Children this age may express feelings of anxiety or sadness by complaining that they feel sick. This gives a parent a great opportunity to show the child that they will continue to take care of them. Children under the age of three may express fears of abandonment between visitations because they do not always have the developmental capacity to internalise memories of the non-residential parent. Finding ways to have a consistent presence can help minimize these feelings.

Older children become more aware of their emotions and the emotions of those around them. Remember, children will have many feelings about the divorce and these feelings will change as they grow and gain a greater understanding of what divorce means in their family. Reaffirm that the divorce is an adult decision to live apart and avoid anything that may make children feel blamed. It is also important to limit conflict and never put children in a position where they have to choose between their parents.

Children may feel guilty – however irrational. They may feel insecure and will need emotional security and care from those around them. Children still need to be parented and it is important not to place expectations on them – “Be brave for Mummy” - it may be a heavy burden too great to bear. They need affirmation that their relationship with each parent is not lost, just different. Help children feel supported, create a space for them to talk, and listen when they express the need to talk. Relate for children and young people have useful information about this.

The Reaction of Family Members

Children learn how to show their emotions by observing others. If parents are pre-occupied by keeping their feelings under control, children may feel they should not show their feelings either. Equally if a parent is overwhelmed with their own sorrow or depression, a child may try to suppress their own feelings. If this is the case, it can be helpful to get support from another member of the family, who may be able to share the emotional burden of managing their child's sadness whilst managing their own intense feelings. Children also need to take a break from grief stricken relatives and their own sadness. It is therefore important to keep their usual routines, such as attending nursery. Their key person and other members of staff will be sensitive and alert to their situation. Often the child may need their play setting to be a safe 'oasis' where they can escape from the emotional environment at home. Others may want to talk about it with their key person or even enact their emotions in role play.

What helps?

The broad framework that allows children to express their sadness and grow through their grief has to be provided by the adults who have responsibility for their care. Sometimes children need the opportunity to say what they want to say to the parent who has left (a picture to say, “I miss you. I love you...”).

Children need:

- Adults around them who they can turn to and trust
- Their feelings to be received without judgement

- To be allowed to cry (it is not helpful for them to be told that they must 'be brave')
- Acceptance if tears do not flow and if they don't show their emotions.
- A secure place in which anger and other feelings can be expressed

Practical ideas include:

- Physical exercise, shouting and noisy play (to release a variety of emotions)
- Allowing aggressive behaviour to be expressed (e.g. a messy painting session)
- Take time before changing familiar patterns or activities.
- Pets can be helpful for a child who needs comforting – an animal to love, cuddle or take on walks. Equally a favourite soft toy can be very comforting.
- Some children like to be cuddled or stroked. Some may like to listen to soft music or a calm story tape.
- Make time for special days, such as anniversaries, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Grandparent Day etc.

Books:

Dinosaurs Divorce: A Guide for Changing Families by Laurene Krasny Brown and Marc Brown

Mum and Dad Glue by Kes Gray and Emma Layfield

Help Your Children Cope With Your Divorce: A Relate Guide by Paula Hall

Vermilion (6 Sep 2007)

Websites:

It's not your fault, run by Action for Children www.itsnotyourfault.org

My family's changing (0870 600 5522) www.tsoshop.co.uk

Relate for children and young people (0300 100 1234) www.relate.org.uk

Dad's space www.dads-space.com/explaining-separation-to-the-kids