

FACT SHEET 10

Answering difficult questions from children

1. Do your best to answer your child's questions

- Children need to understand what's going on when their parents split up.
- Children can cope better if parents and family/whănau give them honest and sensitive answers.
- Don't make up reasons why a parent has gone away.
- Nearly all children hope that their parents will get back together. If this isn't going to happen, then tell your child gently so they can start to adjust.

2. Build reassurance into your answers

- Children's worlds are completely changed when their parents separate. They have a lot to cope with. They need reassurances built around the truth.
- Tell children they're not alone. Explain that there are thousands of children whose parents have separated and who still keep on seeing both their parents.

3. Protect children from adult issues and from your emotions

- Protect your child from details they don't need to know, especially the reasons why you feel hostile to their other parent.
- Children need to be allowed to love and respect both their parents to feel good about themselves. Don't say mean things about a parent in your answers.
- Avoid emotional answers. Talk about your emotional issues with another adult, not with your child.
- Don't say things that carry painful messages for your child. (Don't say: "Our family isn't the most important thing to your dad any more.")
- Don't use the excuse of telling the truth to tell your child things you want them to know to get them onto "your side".

4. Give answers that suit your child's age

- Give simpler answers to younger children. Remember children don't have the experiences adults have to help them make sense of what's happening.
- You can give more complex explanations to older children, but you still need to protect them from adult issues.

5. Don't always wait to be asked

- Children know their parents are under a lot of stress when they've split up, and often don't like to make things worse by asking questions. You can reassure them any time.
- Children often think that it's their fault their parents have separated.
- Children younger than 11 or 12 especially blame themselves for their parents' separation, because the world seems to revolve around them.

- Children worry when there's less money after separation because they want to know if they will be able to keep on doing the things they enjoy.
- Children worry they are going to miss out on things that are important to them when their parents separate, like pets, school, friends, seeing family/whānau.

SOME SUGGESTIONS YOU CAN TRY...

Remember that the exact words you use to answer questions will vary a lot depending on the age of your child.

"Why has mum/dad left us?"

Try to make it really clear that the separation isn't your child's fault, and that it isn't something they can fix. Try something like this –

"[Mum] and I can't keep living together because things have gone wrong between us. It's not your fault. You haven't done anything wrong. And we both still love you."

"Why don't I see mum/dad anymore?"

Children often feel that a parent doesn't want to see them anymore because they are not good or lovable enough. You could reassure them with something like this -

"I can't understand why mum/dad doesn't call you because you're such a great kid. I'm not sure what's going on for them at the moment but I'm guessing they're finding it difficult to sort out their life. Hopefully they'll sort themselves out soon and get back in your life. In the meantime, it is good that you're surrounded by lots of people who love you."

"What will mum/dad be doing now?" "Is mum/dad ok?"

Children worry about whether or not their parents are ok when they're not with them. Make it clear your child isn't responsible for their other parent. Perhaps try -

"I understand you're thinking about dad/mum and you're worried about them. It's OK though, dad/mum's an adult and they can look after themselves. Do you want to give them a call and tell them about your day, or make a picture for them to take next time you go?"



This handout was written by Julia Maskill and Dr Kerry Gould for the Ministry of Justice (2007) and provides additional information to that provided in the free 'Parenting Through Separation' programme delivered for the Ministry of Justice. For details of programmes in your area phone 0800 211 211. There is more information available for parents who have separated from www.justice.govt.nz/family