

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/whānau 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.

