

What to tell the children

Here are some guidelines on the basic things to tell your child.

- What are the immediate practical changes, and what is being done about it? Children need to know what is happening within their lives. Their immediate concerns need to be dealt with. For example, if one parent is moving out, where are they going to and when and where will the child see that parent?
- How much will change? Will the child be going to the same school and will they still be able to see their friends and do their usual activities? Give as much reassurance as you can that you are in control of these events and that the disruption is going to be as little as possible.
- Reassure them about the parent who is leaving. Children often worry about the parent who is not there, wondering where they are and if they are all right. Will they be able to stay with them and where will they be?
- Reassure your child that it is OK to talk about the other parent and to go on loving them. All children need to be reassured that both parents are going to reinforce the child's relationship with the other parent. The child needs to hear this again and again. They need to be able to say that they miss the other parent without fear of causing offence.
- The separation or divorce is not their fault. It is very common for children to blame themselves for their parents' difficulties. They need to be told that this is not the case.
- It is OK to be upset. You need to acknowledge to your child that this is a difficult time. Encourage your child to share his or her feelings.
- It is OK to talk to other people about it. It helps to encourage children to talk to other people such as friends, members of the family or people at school.
- It is OK to ask questions. It is a deeply confusing time for children. They may be embarrassed to ask questions for fear of adding to the distress of their parents. You may not have all the answers but they need as much clarity as possible.

A lot of children find it helpful to talk to people outside the marriage. Some schools have counselling services, as do GPs. There may be mediation services in your community that also have counselling services for children.

Above all, it is important to listen actively to your children, to understand their anxieties and to find out what they need.

It is a difficult balance to show children that you are responsible for them at the same time as being aware of what they want for themselves.