

FACTSHEET No 5:



a better way to settle

Telling the Children

For any parent, telling their children that they are parting will always be painful and difficult. Whilst you may have already taken the long and difficult path to the decision to separate or divorce, your children are only just about to start their journey. It will often come as a great shock to them, even if they had already suspected that something was wrong.

As difficult and painful as it is for you both try to remember that many parents have had to do this before you. On a positive note, if it is done with love and care by both parents together, followed up with continued reassurance and support, children can cope.

As parents you know your children better than anyone and are in the best position to think about their frame of mind and how to deal with the situation. There are no hard and fast rules on breaking the news.

One obvious difficulty is that you may hold very different views about the state of your relationship. It is common for one party to be clear that the relationship has broken down and the other to want reconciliation. Being sensitive to this when telling your children is one of the hardest challenges, but it is essential they receive a clear and consistent explanation of the situation and are not forced to choose between competing views or apportion blame.

The following are some important factors common to all children:

- They need security and to know that you will both always be their parents.
- They must be given the opportunity to express their feelings in whatever way they feel able, whether through extreme anger, complete silence or something in between.
- You will need to decide whether you tell each child individually, them all together or a combination. Jointly you need to agree which will be the best approach for your children and for you as their parents.

Telling the children together

If at all possible speak to them together so that they can see you're not blaming each other, are both still there for them and that they don't have to take sides.

You need however, to consider your own emotions in taking this approach. Will you be able to speak to them jointly without creating further conflict between the two of you? If so, then try to think through together the sort of questions your children are likely to ask and how you will answer them. Also, decide which questions you may not be able to answer at that time and how you will explain this to your children.

Where it is not possible to speak to them together, try at least to agree a common form of words and responses to their obvious questions so that they can trust you are not undermining each other, or drawing them into any argument.

When and where to tell them

If at all possible tell them at home, somewhere they feel safe and comfortable enough to show their emotions. Allow plenty of time for you all to deal with their immediate reactions and think beforehand about how you can make physical, emotional and practical space for them. Don't forget that there are likely to be other delayed reactions as the information sinks in so be available to help and support them throughout the period after you've initially told them.

Be honest

It is important that you don't hedge and retract what you have said because they're upset. Setting up false expectations that cannot be realised will only cause additional pain later. It is important to be reassuring but without making unrealistic promises. This can be a very difficult task as parents never want to feel they have deliberately upset their children or caused them pain.

Be realistic about what they can understand

When telling them, think about what they can understand. They are not adults and their perception and understanding are at a different stage. This can be more difficult where there is a wide age range of children with different levels of understanding. The key thing to remember is that you are the people they love most and are closest to in their whole world. That won't change for them and as such they do not need to hear from either parent about the faults of the other.

Allow them to express their emotions

These may include tears, anger, pleading, promises of good behaviour, fear, bravado, denial. You shouldn't try to stop this, simply let them know you understand that it hurts, but you will try to help them so that it hurts less. Make sure they realise that it is not their fault or because of anything they have done, instead a decision made between their two parents.

Give them information – but not too much

Where possible let them know details of future arrangements. Potential timings of events can be helpful for older children but remember not to overwhelm them with too much information. Think about the age of each child, their level of understanding and what you feel they can realistically take in at this stage.

You can let them know that you are going to be working with people to help them work out what is best for all of you if this is appropriate. Be specific wherever possible but don't over-explain.

Unless they are old enough try not to involve them in the decision-making and even then be mindful of the fact that many children still need their parents to be arbiters of what is best for them.

If one of you is moving out

Where possible involve your children in the move by showing them around your new home and where their room will be when they visit. Children can often worry about the future well being of the parent who is moving out but by allowing them to be involved can alleviate some of these concerns.

Where it isn't possible to involve them to this extent make sure you explain their visiting arrangements so that they can feel reassured they will be seeing you regularly.

Talking it over

It can help for children to talk to their friends about what is going on, some of whom may have parents who have separated. Where they do not talk to any of their friends in this way make sure you reassure them that what is happening often happens in other families too. Ask if they know anyone at school in the same position and also make sure they realise you understand that it can be difficult to talk about such matters.

When your children do talk to you, be prepared for each of you being told very different things as they will want to show their love and loyalties to you both and potentially how angry or upset they are. If possible keep talking to each other throughout this time to help them be reassured that you are united in your concern for them.

Reassurance is needed

Children need constant reassurance that you will both continue to be there for them as their parents. They need to understand that although your relationship is changing it does not alter your feelings for them and that your love for them will remain constant.