

Notes For Parents

Some of the things that we think are important for parents to bear in mind for their children during times of separation and change is as follows:

Telling the children

If it is possible tell your children together. This may need a bit of rehearsal, but it is worth it. Try and reach an agreed story about what you are going to say, and keep blame and anger out of it as much as possible. However much you practice, it is likely to be an emotional event when the time comes.

Leave time to talk and to have a meal together afterwards, a familiar pizza or baked beans can be very reassuring. Let them know that although one of you is leaving the house you will both still be there for them.

Try to keep any raised voices out of the event. Giving the message you can still talk to them together even if you are not living together can be important.

Be prepared to answer your children's questions, but do not feel that you have to give them private details about your relationship and what has gone wrong. If you can't answer any questions say so, rather than creating a great mystery about it which they will worry about later.

Don't give your child impossible decisions to make like who they want to live with. The adults need to be very clear about what is realistic before they turn it into an issue of choice and loyalty for the children to begin to worry over.

Explain to the children that it is mum and dad, the parents, who have separated; and not the parent who has separated from the children. Even if a parent has left home he or she has left because they no longer wished to live with their former husband or wife, not because they do not wish to live with the children.

Children may need reassuring that the parent who stays in the household will not leave also. Let them know that this will not happen and tell them that they are both loved and will be looked after.

Where it is left to one of you to tell the children, tell the child, if it is known, that the parent who is no longer in the household will continue to be their parent and will continue to see them on a regular basis. However, where this is not known it is better not to set up false promises but to undertake to find out and sort out the question of visits on behalf of the child.

Where possible let the child know that it is alright for them to love and to miss the parent who is no longer in the household. Sad feelings and angry feelings are OK. You can let your children know that you have sad and angry feelings too without overwhelming them.

Let your child know that it is not their fault that one of you has decided to leave or that the parents have together decided to separate. Children of all ages believe they are to blame when their parents quarrel, and when they separate this can be a confirmation of their worst fears. They will need to hear this many times. You will need to find some explanation that makes sense to you and to them over time and you may need to do some work with your partner on what story you do tell them so that they are not getting conflicting messages from each of you.

If the children go on feeling responsible for the break-up, they may take on the job of getting you back together. It is important to watch out for this, and keep reminding them that it is not their responsibility.

Do not create false expectations that you may get back together in an attempt to protect them from being hurt. It is best for children to have a realistic and honest perspective of the situation.

Longer-term issues

If you are angry with your children do not tell them that they are like the parent who has gone. It is easy to use words like 'you're just like your father' when the child is doing something that reminds you of your former partner. It may make them more anxious to know you are criticising them for something that they know led to a separation.

Try and find a regular time of day when you can have some quiet time with your children or even with each child individually. This can be difficult when you have to reorganise so many things yourself, but it is of real value to your child.

Encourage your child to talk about how they feel, to you, to a friend or to a grandparent or aunt or uncle that they trust. Let them know that putting feelings into words can help in the long run.

Try to keep the number of other changes in their lives to a minimum. At a time when a child is dealing with a major change and loss in their lives, the loss of quite small things can bring out a disproportionate amount of grief.

School

School becomes a very important place at a time when other things are shifting at home. Let the teacher know what is going on so that he or she can be in tune with emotional or moody behaviours, or with any unusual difficulties in learning. Even if you have to move

home, try and keep your child at the same school so that they do not lose their friends. If you do have to move school and home, then talk to your child about which of their friends they would like to stay in touch with and how you might go about arranging this.

Children often wish that parents could go on coming to school events together. If you find this too difficult let your child know that you just can't manage it at the moment, but that it may become easier in the future.

Be sensitive to attending school events or other special events with a new partner. Children would often rather a parent went on their own if they can't get on with the other parent. When you do decide to make this move to go with a new partner, talk about it with your child first and get their views. It is their event after all.

Relationship with ex-partner

Try and set up arrangements for contact that are reliable and regular. Understand how much a child looks forward to their other parent's visits and try to make sure they are not let down at the last minute. Encourage your ex-partner to try and be on time for arrangements that have been made.

If you do disappoint your child, or you can see that they are hurt or angry, let them tell you what they feel about it. Don't just brush it under the carpet.

If you are living out of the house, always make another date when you have finished the time you are spending together so that your child knows when they can see you again. Remember that you can keep in touch on the phone and send cards if you have to work a long way away. Let the children know when they can phone you and be there for the call. Even a personal message on an answerphone can mean a lot when you want to make contact with someone very much.

Do not involve your children as 'go-betweens' or message carriers.

Do not use them to spy on your ex-partner or on any new relationships they may be having. It is not good for them or for you.

Do not speak badly of your ex-partner in front of the children. Remember that although he or she is your 'ex', they remain the child's parent for life. It is sometimes tempting to do so, especially when you are feeling hurt or angry, but it is really important at these times to hold on and find a moment to phone a relative or friend to get it off your chest, rather than hurt your child.

Try not to compete with your child's 'other' parent over who loves them more. Specially beware of bidding for love through giving presents or promising treats that will make you more appealing than the other parent. If you find that the parent who is not living at

home always feels they have to come with a present, try and find a way of talking to them about this.

New partners

Meeting a new boyfriend or girlfriend is usually very uncomfortable for a child, and it is always better to talk a little bit about the new person with them beforehand. Try not to rush them into a meeting.

Let them know something of your feelings that this is someone who is good for you. Don't expect them to rush into liking your partner, and remember that they may still be feeling loyal to their own mum or dad for many years to come. If you can let them know that you know that, and don't expect them to rush into liking your friend, this will help them to be less tangled up about it.

Reassure them that the fact you have a new friend does not mean that you love them, your child, any less. Children often get confused about being replaced by a new partner. Reassure them that as your child they have a special place in your life which is not replaceable.

Don't forget you and your new partner may have very different ideas about how to bring children up. Spend some time checking these out so that children don't get muddled by different sets of ideas coming from each of you.

Be sensitive to how they take on board new stepbrothers or sisters, and give time to overseeing and talking about how these new relationships are going.