The Anchor Fact Sheet 4
How to talk to kids about separation

The need for a separation story

Children understand that their parents can be unhappy with each other and even not want to live together anymore. The issue is that they don’t really understand the difference between a couple relationship and a parents’ relationship. So when parents decide to separate due to couple issues and conflict, younger children often confuse it with the concept that they don’t want to be parents together anymore. This can be reinforced for them when one parent leaves the family home and the children don’t see them for a little while. They can end up blaming themselves for the separation in their attempt to make sense of what is happening to their family, e.g. “Maybe I was a bad child”, “That’s why Dad/Mum isn’t here anymore”, or “Maybe they don’t want to be my Mum/Dad anymore?” Children will try to work out a reason for these separation when they aren’t told why parents separated. This is why it’s very important that both parents give them a clear, non-blaming explanation for why they have separated.

What can be difficult about talking about separation?

Much of the “cold, hard” reality of separation is too painful even for adults. There can be bitterness and regret and rage and distress and accusations and name calling... all markers of adult distress at the painful ending of a relationship. Children should not be exposed to any of this. They do not need to know about intimate adult reasons for the breakup, e.g. an affair or dissatisfaction in the relationship. Besides not knowing what to say, for some parents it may be unclear whether the relationship is really over. It takes the adult couple some time before they decide and then both can accept there will not be reconciliation. So children can be left wondering what’s happening in their family, without an explanation, for some months or even years.

What do children need?

Children need a simple, child-focused “story” about why parents separate. Children can’t take in the information when they are emotional – i.e. at the time of the separation and that’s why it is really helpful to talk about the separation, and the reasons for it, a number of times. This will help them process it and as their understanding grows through the years, they can make sense of what’s happened. They need the reason for these separation to be about their Mum and Dad’s relationship, not about them.
Some examples of things to say

“Your Dad and I decided it was better not to live together anymore because we stopped loving each other and/or we couldn’t stop fighting. We will both always love you.”

“Your Mum/Dad and I aren’t living together anymore because we aren’t a couple, but we are still your parents. We will always be your Mum and Dad.”

“Your Mum/Dad and I are separating because we are not getting along very well. This might mean we never live together again. We aren’t sure at the moment. We will let you know as soon as we decide for sure.”

For a younger child:

“Sometimes Mum/Dad aren’t very happy... we can be happier if we live in two different homes. This means you will see Dad at his house and Mum at her house. We are still your family and always will be your Mum and Dad.”

Some guidelines for parents

➢ Don’t use lengthy explanations. Keep it short. Two or three sentences are enough.
➢ Stay focused on what the children need to hear, rather than your need to explain your actions.
➢ Make it age appropriate, i.e. simple language and concrete explanations for young children.
➢ Make sure neither parents is blamed in the “separation story”. Don’t place your children in the position of having to choose who was right and who as wrong.
➢ Reassure your children that you love them and will always be their parents.
➢ If you don’t know all the answers, let them know you’ll make things clear to them when you are clearer yourselves.

The Anchor – supporting kids through separation

For more information call our customer service team on 1800 864 846 or email ask@uniting.org