
Family breakups - supporting children

Summary

- A child can experience grief, anger, sadness and confusion over the breakup of their family.
 - They may blame themselves.
 - Find sources of emotional support for yourself, so that you have the strength to help your child.
 - Avoid criticising the other parent in front of your child.
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Family breakups are often difficult for children. Parents can help their kids by giving them honest explanations and emotional support.

Children of all ages experience a wide range of bewildering emotions when their parents separate or divorce. These may include sadness, anger, fear, jealousy and insecurity. Don't underestimate your child's capacity to understand what is going on around them. Trying to spare your child by not explaining to them what's happening will only cause them more confusion.

If it is possible for both parents together to explain the situation simply, use words the child can understand. You may have to explain several times before the child fully grasps what has happened to their family and what their future holds. Be aware that your child will want the family to stay as it is, so they may not want to hear what you are telling them.

Children may think they or their behaviour are to blame for the breakup. It is important to keep reinforcing that this is not the case.

Everyone grieves in different ways

Grief is the normal emotional response to the loss of something precious. Everyone grieves in different ways. Children, like adults, may grieve inconsistently, seeming fine one day, only to be very upset and depressed the next.

Your child may:

- Have regular nightmares or difficulty sleeping – they may want to sleep with you
- Show out-of-character behaviour, such as temper tantrums
- Start to have difficulties with school work or not want to go to away from the family
- Exhibit aggressive or withdrawn behaviour
- Be more fearful than usual
- Cover up hurt through indifferent or cold behaviour
- Develop problems with eating, such as going off their food or 'comfort eating'
- Have physical complaints, such as headaches
- Blame themselves for the breakup
- Blame the parent they are spending the most time with
- Worry excessively, particularly about family members who are upset
- Regress to an earlier stage of development – for example, thumb sucking or bedwetting.

Everyone needs support

Separation and divorce are emotionally difficult times for everyone. Sometimes, a parent can be so overwhelmed by their own pain that they are unable to support their child. The parent may fail to notice the child's distress. They

may also expect the child to emotionally support them, instead of the other way around.

It is important to find support for yourself – through family members, friends or professionals – so that you can look after yourself and also feel strong enough to support your child. Your child may also need professional support and counselling.

Explaining a breakup to your child

Ways of helping your child to understand what has happened include:

- If possible, both parents should explain the breakup to the child, particularly when breaking the news.
- Reassure your child that the breakup is not their fault in any way and that both parents still love them.
- Tell your child, in as much detail as you can, about their new routine: where they will live, who will take them to school and so on. It is a good idea to wait until you think they are ready to hear this information.
- Allow your child to ask as many questions as they want.
- Answer truthfully and honestly. It is OK to be upset.
- Use age-appropriate language.
- As the child matures, you can explain the separation in more sophisticated ways.
- Be prepared to explain the separation to the child again and again.
- Seek professional advice if you feel it is necessary for yourselves or your child.

Sometimes, it may be hard to find the right words for your child. It can be helpful to say:

- ‘Sometimes mums and dads stop loving one another. It’s really sad when this happens.’
- ‘Dad/Mum has stopped loving me and doesn’t want to go on living with me, but that doesn’t mean he/she doesn’t still love you and wants to go on seeing you. So we are going to work out how to make this happen.’

Helping your child to deal with their feelings

Suggestions to help your child cope include:

- Encourage your child to talk about their feelings openly and as often as they want.
- Tell your child that it is OK to have a range of different feelings and suggest appropriate ways to express these feelings. This may include writing down feelings in a diary or releasing feelings through physical activity such as running or gardening.
- Share your own feelings – for example, cry together.
- Be prepared to constantly reassure the child of your love for them and the love of the other parent.
- Arrange as much contact with the absent parent as possible.
- Try to maintain some kind of regular routine to give your child a sense of security.
- Remind your child that their painful feelings will lessen with time.
- Read child-oriented books on separation and divorce together.

Don’t criticise the other parent

A breakup is a painful event. Each parent may have grievances or complaints about the other. It is important that the child does not become involved in these grievances, as this adds further distress for the child. Your child may feel pressured to disapprove of the other parent in order to secure your ongoing affection.

Regardless of your feelings towards your ex-partner, your child still loves them and deserves an untainted relationship with them. Don’t criticise the other parent, their parenting style, household set-up or other things about their life. Don’t use your child to ‘spy’ on your ex-partner.

Where to get help

- Maternal and child health nurse
- Parentline Tel. 13 22 89
- **Family Relationship Advice Line** Tel. 1800 050 321 Monday to Friday, 8am to 8pm, Saturday, 10am to 4pm
- Other parents

- Family and friends
- Your doctor
- Professionals such as counsellors

Things to remember

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