

Answering difficult questions from children

A Parenting Through Separation programme factsheet

Do your best to answer your children's questions

Children need to understand what's going on when their parents split up. They deal with things better if parents and family/whānau give them honest answers in a gentle way.

- Don't make up reasons why a parent has gone away.
- Nearly all children hope their parents will get back together. If this isn't going to happen, tell your children gently so they can start to adjust.

Build reassurance into your answers

Children's worlds are completely changed when their parents separate and they need to know they'll be OK.

- Tell children they're not alone. Explain that there are thousands of children whose parents have separated and who still keep on seeing both their parents.

Protect children from adult issues and from your emotions

Protect your children from details they don't need to know, especially the reasons for anger you may feel towards their other parent. Children need to be able to love and respect both their parents to feel good about themselves.

- Don't say unkind things about a parent in your answers.
- Avoid emotional answers. Talk with another adult about your emotional issues, not with your children.
- Don't say things that carry painful messages for your children (like "Our family isn't the most important thing to your dad/mum anymore.")
- Don't pick and choose the truths you tell your children to try and get them on your side.

Give answers that suit each child's age

- Give simpler answers to younger children. Children don't have the experience adults have to help them make sense of what's happening.
- You can give more detailed answers to older children but you still need to protect them from adult issues.

Don't always wait to be asked

Children know their parents are under a lot of stress when they've split up and often think they'll make things worse by asking questions. It's important to encourage your children to ask questions.

- Children often think it's their fault their parents separated.
- Children worry when there's less money after separation, because they want to know if they'll be able to keep on doing the things they enjoy.
- Children worry they're going to miss out on things that are important to them when their parents separate, like pets, school, friends, seeing family/whānau.

It helps if you keep telling them they're going to be OK.

Examples of answers to common questions

These are examples only; you know your children best. The exact words you use to answer questions will change a lot, depending on the ages of your children, their needs, their personalities and how you usually talk with them.

Question: "Why has mum/dad left us?"

Try to make it really clear the separation isn't their fault and isn't something they can fix.

Try something like: "[Mum/dad] and I can't keep living together, because things have gone wrong between us. It's not your fault. You haven't done anything wrong; we both still love you."

Question: "Why don't I see mum/dad anymore?"

Children often feel that a parent doesn't want to see them anymore because they're not good, or lovable, enough. **You could reassure them with something like:** "I can't understand why mum/dad doesn't call you, because you're such a great kid. I'm not sure what's going on for them at the moment, but I'm guessing they're finding it difficult to sort out their life. Hopefully they'll sort themselves out soon and get back in your life. In the meantime, it's good that you're surrounded by lots of people who love you."

Question: "What will mum/dad do now?" "Is mum/dad OK?"

Children often worry about whether or not their parents are OK when they're not with them. Make it clear your children aren't responsible for their other parent.

Try something like: "I understand you're thinking about dad/mum and you're worried about them. It's okay though, dad/mum's an adult and they can look after themselves. Do you want to give them a call and tell them about your day or make a picture to give them next time you see them?"

To find out more, go to
[justice.govt.nz/family/resources](https://www.justice.govt.nz/family/resources)