
WHEN PARENTS SEPARATE

One of the many dilemmas when couples split up is how to tell the children. At a time when emotions are raw there are very pressing matters to be sorted with the children. Parents want to save them from the hurt and the inevitable compromises they will have to make. Unfortunately, discussions about the situation can't be left.

Children need to know that their family structure is about to change. Being as honest as is appropriate helps children to grasp the reality. However, any details which relate to adult relationships should be avoided. So too should the bad- mouthing of one partner about the other. The couple are still the children's Mum and Dad and those relationships are very precious to the children.

It is vital to give the children some explanation otherwise they will think they are in some way to blame. Young children need simple explanations. Older children can handle a little more detail. As the children try to take in what is happening it is good to tell them about plans for the immediate future. This will help the children feel a little bit more reassured. With so much happening children will need time to talk and to ask questions. If parents are not able to do this as much as they would like due to their own distress, then other family members can be a great support.

Q

My son is seven and I separated from his father a month ago. His Dad has gone off with another girl who was a friend of mine. I feel so angry and betrayed. My son can't understand it and I am at a loss to know what to say.

A

Telling children about what went wrong with an adult relationship is immensely difficult, not least because we as adults find it hard to understand it ourselves.

All you can do is to say that Dad has decided to live in another house with someone else. You need to make sure he realises that he is in no way the cause but that it is to do with the adults. Too much detail can lead you into portraying his Dad in a bad light. Much as you may feel like doing it, your child should not be put in a position which in any way leads him to take sides.

Issues around separation and managing the children can be complex. PAC is running a workshop 'Parenting Apart' which helps parents with these very issues. For further details contact andrea@pachelp.org.

