

Listening to your child

Listening to your child's experience of the separation can be difficult. Seeing their sadness and anxiety can leave you feeling guilty and many parents choose to ignore it or simply put on a happy face, offer a few comforting words and then move on to something else as quickly as possible.

However, not allowing your children to talk about how they are feeling is likely to delay or even prevent them from coming to terms with the changes that are taking place. It can allow them to create their own narrative about what is happening – for example that they are to blame for the separation. Giving your children the space and the time to talk about their feelings means that they won't be still trying to deal with them later on in their childhood or even later and into adulthood.

Tips for talking and listening to your child

Knowing what to say and how to approach the subject of separation can be difficult. Here are a few things to bear in mind when talking and listening to your child.

- **Don't hide from their distress**

Separated parents often say that their children aren't affected by the separation and are just fine. This is rarely the case. All children will be affected by family separation and will almost always need the opportunity to be able to express how they feel.

- **Be aware that children hide their true feelings**

Children are very good at gauging the emotional temperature around them. Children who see their mum and dad in distress will try to make sure that they don't make things any worse. It's up to you to reassure them that talking about their feelings is okay.

- **Help your children to open up**

Some children will find it easy to talk about what's going on for them but others will find it much more difficult. If you think that your child is burying their own experience, try giving them the signal that it's okay to talk. Say something like *'I'm feeling pretty sad today, how are you feeling?'* If they don't seem ready to talk, don't force it, but try again at a later date.

- **Validate their experience**

It's important that you validate a child's feelings and experiences. If they tell you that they're feeling sad, don't try to persuade them that they don't. Acknowledge how they're feeling and invite them to tell you more about it.

- **Don't interrogate**

No one likes feeling like they are being interrogated. Try to be sensitive to your child's experience and gently invite them to talk. Instead of saying *'tell me what's the matter'*, try something like *'you seem sad today'*.

- **Use open questions**

Younger children will often find it difficult to put their experiencing into words. Try using 'open' questions to get them to go a little further. Try phrases like *'what do you think has made you feel like that'* or *'tell me about how that makes you feel'*.

- **Keep the opportunities open**

Family separation is a series of transitions rather than a one off event. Don't be in a hurry to close down the opportunities to talk. Give your child permission to keep exploring and expressing what's going on for them.

- **Help young children to describe their feelings**

Young children often don't have the vocabulary or skills to tell you what they're feeling. You can help them to express themselves through play and drawing. Small children will often simply draw the immediate world around them. Get them to tell you about their picture and work from there.

- **Take care with older boys**

Older boys, particularly, can find it difficult to talk about their experiences and feelings. Try talking about things while you're doing something else. Talking side by side without eye contact will feel much more comfortable for him and probably for you too.

- **Be prepared...**

Lastly, be prepared to feel hurt, they may well tell you that it's your fault that they're feeling unhappy. Just let them say it.

Active listening

Listening is an active rather than passive activity. By thinking about how you listen and how you respond, you can help your child feel that they are being listened to and understood. This is a very important factor in helping them to deal with their experiences.

- **Active listening**

Practise listening to your child without saying a word. Don't ask any questions, don't make any interruptions and don't make any comments until they have finished speaking.

Instead, use verbal nods such as *'uh-huh'*, *'mm'* and *'ah'* and *'yes'* to demonstrate that you are listening and understand what you child is telling you.

- **Reflective listening**

Hearing our own words reflected back reassures us that we've been understood and offers the chance to clarify or build upon what we've said.

Try using phrases like *'I imagine you're feeling...'* and *'It seems to me you're saying...'* to give your child the chance to clarify or expand what he or she has told you.

- **Name the feeling**

Giving feelings a name values and validates a child's experience and can help them to pin down what they are feeling. Listen carefully to what they tell you and how they say it.

Use phrases like *'I can see you feel upset about this...'* or *'you sound very angry'* and be as specific as you can be.

- **Acknowledge the emotion**

Good listening is about allowing your child to say how they feel about something and not expecting them to feel the same as you do. It's important to accept how your child feels even if it's different to how you feel.

Use phrases like *'You feel you hate me at the moment'*.

- **Accept the feeling**

How ever difficult it may feel for you, accepting a feeling validates your child's experience and encourages them to talk about why they feel the way they do.

Use phrases like *'I understand how angry you are'*.