

Tips for family and whānau to help children affected by a separation

A Parenting Through Separation programme factsheet.

This information is for all adults in your family/whānau including grandparents, aunts and uncles.

1. Understanding the children's needs

There may be children in your family/whānau whose parents have separated or who are in the process of separating. You can help these children by understanding the following:

- Children need both their parents for life. The only relationship that has ended is the adult one between their parents.
- Children still need to have the best relationship they can with both their parents.
- It's tough for children after their parents separate. What helps them through is to have really close, ongoing relationships with both parents.
- In most cases, children need both their parents, even when one of them is not perfect or seems to have acted unfairly. The only exception is for safety.
- Children need both their parents for their self-esteem and mana, to deal with life's challenges, to keep family relationships going and whānaungatanga.
- Parents often lose contact with their children because contact is made difficult for them. This makes separation much worse for their children.
- Conflict between their parents (fighting, arguing and going to court) can damage children.
- A child's relationship with their grandparents and other family/whānau on both sides are really important to help them through this difficult time.

2. Helpful things you can do

- Make the children feel welcome to spend time with you so they can have a pleasant and relaxed break from any stress at home.
- Let them (and their parents) know you're there to talk about how things are going, without putting them under pressure to answer questions.
- Encourage them to tell their parents what's important for them for the new living arrangements, including seeing family/whānau and friends.
- Support their parents in making the best arrangements for their children's needs, even when this is difficult because of how they feel about each other.

- Encourage their parents to make a Parenting Plan to sort things out for their children as soon as possible, even before sorting out money and property issues.
- Offer practical help to give the parents a break during the times when one of them will be doing the parenting on their own.
- Think and act like a peacemaker. Suggest reasonable compromises.
- Encourage the parents to resolve relationship issues but always away from their children.
- Encourage the parents to take good care of themselves, physically and emotionally.

3. What you can do to help when there's a new partner (and step-brothers and step-sisters)

- Encourage the parents to be realistic about new relationships.
- Find out what the difficulties are likely to be, so that you can offer support.
- Be as fair as you can between the children and their new step-brothers and step-sisters, especially when they're little, to avoid making difficult relationships worse.

4. Taking sides will make things worse for everyone

- Don't encourage one of the parents to make it difficult for the other parent to see their children.
- Don't say unkind things about one parent in front of their children. They feel a part of both parents and will feel put down as well.
- Don't encourage either parent to spend too much time concentrating on what they can't change after they've had a chance to work through their feelings.
- Once the parents have had a chance to work through their feelings, help them focus on the positives, like how they can be great parents to their children.

To find out more, go to
justice.govt.nz/family/resources