

Supporting your son or daughter through a separation

When a relationship breaks down it has an impact not only on the couple and their children but also family friends and extended family. As the parent of a son or daughter, who is going through the breakdown of their relationship or separation, you may experience many feelings and thoughts about this. You may feel sadness, loss, anger or disappointment. You may feel caught in the middle, or have strong feelings of loyalty to your son or daughter and therefore feel that you need to take a side. You may be concerned about what this may mean for your relationship with your grandchildren, as well as the relationship you may have with their other parent.

Nobody expects their relationship to end so when it does it may bring feelings of loss, anger, hurt, confusion and fear to name a few. Sometimes there can be a feeling of shame, guilt and self blame. It can be expected that following a break up, your son or daughter and your grandchildren will need support from their loved ones to get them through this difficult time.

Top Tips

1. **Listen** – Listening to your son or daughter can be of great support as they negotiate the changes happening in their life and how they feel about this. Be there for them but be aware that you cannot change or fix what has happened. They will be experiencing a lot of different emotions and at times just being listened to can be a great help. Never judge or say ‘I told you so’; this is never constructive. Instead, offer what support you can, whether it is practical, financial support or a listening ear; it could be just what they need from you. Be mindful of giving advice that has not been asked for. Your grandchildren may be feeling sad, confused or angry and they may have trouble talking about how they feel. It can be helpful for you to ask them how they are feeling, to reassure them that they are loved and that you are there for them, even though their family life might be quite different now. Simply spending some quality time with them can be reassuring and comforting for them.
2. **Stay Neutral** – It is important to remember to stay neutral and not to take sides. While it may feel natural to take your son or daughter’s side it is not helpful to get over involved. As you will have a relationship with your grandchild’s other parent it is important to remain as objective as you can. This is also the case when speaking with your grandchildren about their mum and dad and to always be respectful when talking about your grandchild’s parent or visiting them.

3. **Avoid Criticism** – When speaking about your son or daughter’s partner or spouse it is important not to criticise, insult or talk negatively about them. No child wants to hear anyone say anything bad about their mum or dad as it can be very hurtful and confusing for them. Talking about your grandchild’s mum or dad in a positive way, or at the very least with a neutral tone, is important for the sake of your grandchild. Be positive when speaking about your grandchild’s mum or dad, no matter how you may feel about them or their behaviour.
4. **Set Appropriate Boundaries** - When supporting your son or daughter or grandchildren through this difficult time it can be helpful for everyone to have some boundaries in place. Due to the change in circumstances grandparents may become more relied upon to provide childcare or additional supports. A conversation around what supports you are in a position to offer can be helpful for everyone.

It is also important for you and your grandchild’s parents to remember that circumstances change and flexibility will be required at times, so clear communication is vital. It can help to keep the children’s needs and well-being at the very centre, when creating realistic plans as well as anticipating changes in the future.

5. **Additional Supports** - Sometimes it can help to source information on services available that may provide additional help, such as counselling, parenting courses or mediation etc. While you should never push your son or daughter into getting help, you can provide them with information that they can look into if they do choose to seek external support when the time is right for them.
6. **Encourage and Support Self Care** – It can be easier for your son or daughter to focus on the children being OK as well as the practical matters of separation and yet in doing so, they may neglect their own well-being. With this in mind it can be helpful to gently remind them to eat well, to get some exercise and time to themselves as this will help with their physical and emotional wellbeing. Perhaps you would be able to mind your grandchild while they visit a friend or take some time to relax or maybe you can cook a healthy meal for them once in a while? But don’t forget to look after yourself and your own needs too.

Askonefamily helpline is available to those who are parenting alone, sharing parenting or separating, for information and a listening ear. It is also available to relatives and friends, parents and grandparents of one parent families.