

# PARENTING TOP TIPS

Answering Children's  
Questions About  
Parental Separation:

The  
Age-Appropriate Way  
for 4–6 year-olds

The term 'age appropriate' is something parents hear all the time, but it can be a somewhat confusing term. Children develop at different rates both cognitively and emotionally and their capacity to comprehend what their parents are telling them or asking of them depends on their stage of development.

Parental separation is a difficult topic for parents to talk about with their children, especially with all of the emotions involved. Knowing what to tell children and what is not appropriate is key to supporting your child to have a positive relationship post-separation with both of their parents. Children need age-appropriate information, otherwise they can worry about the unknown.

Getting it right for your child is important to help them through parental separation. The following guidance should help you answer those awkward questions.



# C-H-I-L-D

## C - CONSISTENT

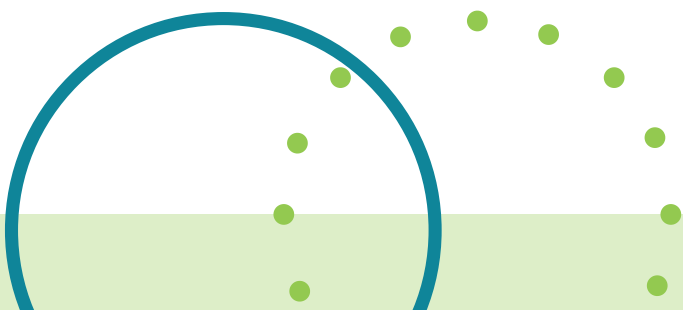
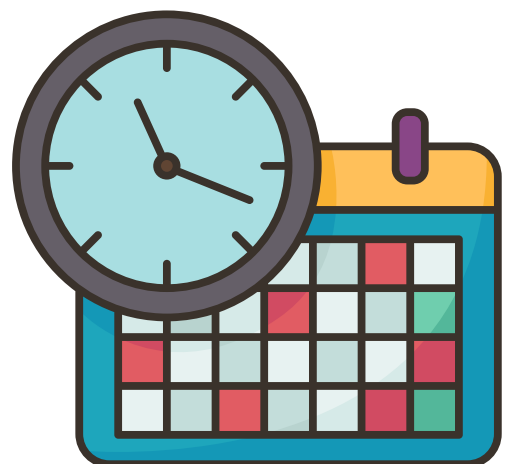
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We all thrive on consistent routines. Most children aged 4-6 are very interested in understanding what is happening around them.

They are fully tuned into family life and act out many family situations through their play as they process what each interaction means for them.

At the time of parental separation, it is important to remain consistent in your approach to answering questions. Talk with the other parent and try to agree on what you will tell your child about what is happening in the family.

Children of this age need to be reassured by hearing the same information from both parents. If you are inconsistent it can lead to confusion and anxiety for children, resulting in changes in your child's behaviour.



# C-H-I-L-D

## H - HAND IT BACK

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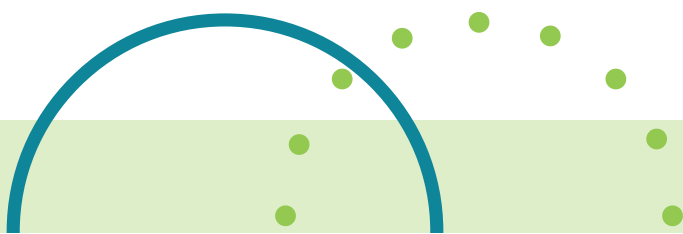
At times parents feel under pressure to answer the many questions young children can have for them. At the time of parental separation children will have many questions when given the space to ask them.

It is really good to 'hand it back' to them. Instead of trying to answer every question or justify why something is happening ask your child – What is this like for you? Tell me more about what you are thinking!

By doing this you are helping to unravel the big ball of tangled webs in your child's mind. You are seeking more clarity around what it is they are worried about. Many children aged 4-6 years will worry about what will happen to their family post-separation. They may worry about simple things like who will take them to school or tuck them in at night.

By asking your child to tell you more about what it will be like when they live separately with both parents, you will hear more about their worries and in turn be in a better position to offer reassurance.

We don't always need to have the answers. It is better to tell your child you are happy they told you something and you will talk it over with the other parent or think about it. This way you can support their understanding and engage your child in a meaningful way with what is happening.



# C-H-I-L-D

## I - IMAGINATION

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During parental separation it is key to support children to imagine the future. At the time of the change things can seem very gloomy and lonely for them.

Children aged 4-6 years are still in the imaginative play time of their development. When they ask awkward questions, it can be really beneficial to role play with them.

Example: You are playing dolls with your child

- You can introduce the concept of the doll living in two homes. Through this play you can add in fun things about the doll moving between homes, while also adding things that might make young children feel sad when this change occurs.
- You can add in things around how the parent is feeling when they leave the doll off to the other parent.
- Your child will see this and in turn will act out some scenarios too.

In the play you do not need to correct their thinking, try to understand what they are thinking and then unravel it with them through play. This can work equally as well if you are playing superheroes or tea parties.



# C-H-I-L-D

## L - LANGUAGE

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Children aged 4-6 years have an extensive vocabulary. However, they are still processing what all of these words mean. It is important to offer children of this age short and simple answers.

They are often seeking factual information, for example, where is Daddy going to live now? Why is Mummy moving to a new house? Keep your answers age appropriate and consider what your child knows and understands.

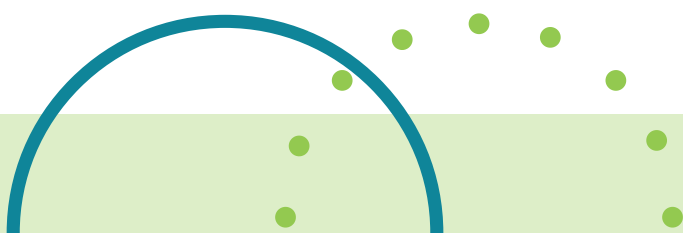
Example:

- Daddy is going to live in a house near the river. He has a big bedroom in his house so when you go to stay you will have lots of room to play.
- What things would you like to do with Daddy when you go to his home?
- Your child could respond with questions like how far away is Daddy's house, how will I get him to get my ball when it goes over the hedge?
- You can go through their different concerns and resolve them.

Allow your child to talk more when you offer an answer to them, to ensure you are fully grasping what they are thinking about.

Try not to fixate on the question your child asks, but think about what they are worried about or what need is not being met for them due to the family changes.

Keep it simple! Remember your child should be talking more than you.



# C-H-I-L-D

## D - DON'T AVOID

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Many parents avoid answering children's awkward questions, thinking children are too young to understand. Often parents can be driven by emotion and tell children too much or too little about parental separation.

It is really important to remember that children need to be included in all decisions affecting them. Don't always leave it to the child to ask a question or presume they already know what is going on. Children very rarely expect parents to separate unless they have been prepared in some way.

It will come as a surprise and can make them sad or angry. Most children love their parents equally and want to spend time with them both. As parents, it is important to consider how you can continue to support your child to have a relationship with their other parent post-separation.

How can you uphold this right for them? Tell children from the start what is happening. Allow children to have a part in this process. You cannot do everything they want, but you can hear them and let them know you hear how hard this is for them.

Be open with children about all family changes. Your relationship will be more secure as your child continues to trust you. You are the best person to talk with your child about family separation.

