

PARENTING TOP TIPS

Answering Children's
Questions About
Parental Separation:

The
Age-Appropriate Way
for 7–10 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

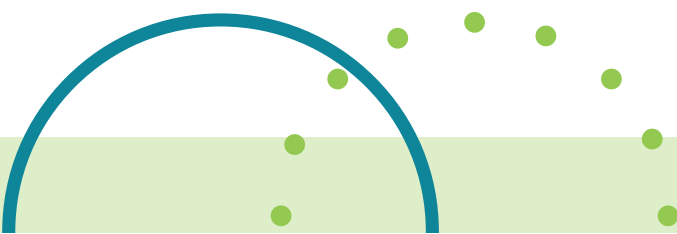
We all thrive on consistent routines. Most children aged 7-10 years are well settled into a consistent routine of family life, school and after school activities. They are not only tuned into family life but can often understand a lot about what is going on in the adult world and the community around them.

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

Children of this age need continued reassurance as their self-esteem develops and they start to engage in life outside of the home. This age group will have very strong and often secure relationships with both of their parents. They choose who to ask about certain things and know who can meet what needs for them.

Being consistent in how you include them in parental separation will be key to how they respond to this family change. Children will not want to be left out of decisions that affect them.

Parents need to share the same message with them. If not, children will feel they cannot trust parents and may seek information elsewhere. Try to offer a consistent pattern of what the routine will involve. This routine may change as the family settles into post separation life, but talking about this with your child will prepare them for any such changes.



C-H-I-L-D

H - HAND IT BACK

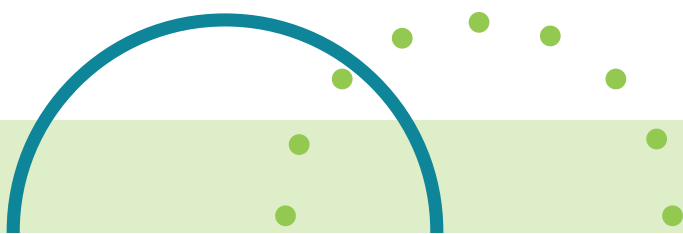
At times parents feel under pressure to answer the many questions children can have for them. At the time of parental separation children will have many questions when given the space to ask them.

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 7-10 years will worry about the future and worry about parents and siblings. They may worry about simple things like who will take them to school or sports activities. They may also have the capacity to worry about money and finances.

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

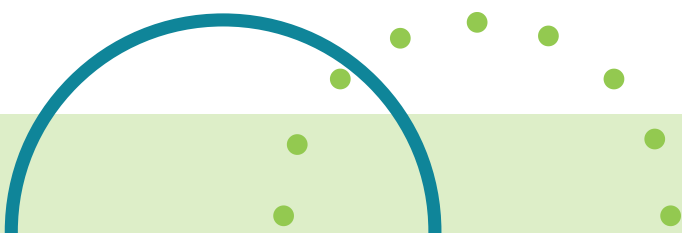
Children aged 7-10 years have a great capacity to imagine the future and often have experience writing stories and reading books, which allows them to consider the future and what it might hold for them.

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 can easily get stuck in a place where they think they will never be happy again or that their parents will never be happy again.

Help them to imagine the future, when things are resolved and settled. Discuss how they will share their time with both parents and how both parents will be there for them along with extended family and friends.

Thinking about the future can trigger anxiety – but a growing body of research suggests that it can also make our lives more meaningful. Sitting with your child and imagining the future, 3 months time, 6 months, 1 year will help you get an insight into what your child wants in time.

This will support you to separate well. You can help make your child's dreams around family to come true by making good decisions now that will impact the outcomes for you and your children in the future.



C-H-I-L-D

L - LANGUAGE

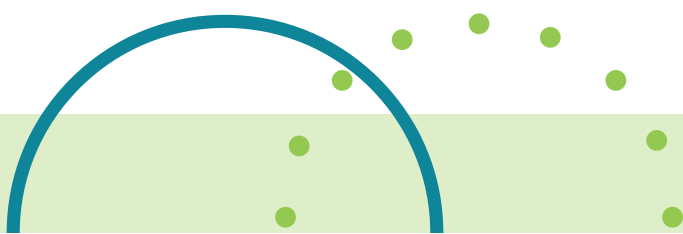
Children of 7-10 years have an extensive vocabulary and can often speak as clearly as many adults. However, it is still important to ensure that you are sharing information with them that they need and understand. Children of this age will seek factual information, but will be more inclined to be emotionally driven. Children will not just want to know why a parent is moving out but what led to it.

Helping children to understand the complexity of adult relationships while supporting them to not judge or blame either parent requires time to talk, to listen and to understand what your child can comprehend. 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.

Example: Do you not love Mummy anymore, why are you moving out?

- Parents can respond by saying:
 - I love you loads, and I will always care about your Mummy because she is a really important person in your life.
 - I need to move out because your Mum and I cannot live together anymore. We fight a lot, you hear us at times, and it will make us both happier when we are not fighting. I need you to know that I will always be your dad and I will be here for you, we will work this out.

Children need to be reassured that you are not leaving them, you are just creating a safer and happier space for each family member to thrive in. Children will struggle with this, but overtime you can support them to understand what this means.



C-H-I-L-D

D - DON'T AVOID

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.

