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Explaining an absent Parent to Young Children

The most important part of talking to a child about an absent parent is to make sure that you have dealt with your own feelings about your past relationship with the other parent and that you can step back from the emotion of the situation and talk about it freely. This is important because it allows you to truthfully answer your child's questions for their benefit, rather than trying to avoid the questions because you are still hurt by the past.

If you don't answer your child's questions they may ask other people and may not get correct information about their family situation. It is important that your child gets the information they need from you. It is also better for your child to feel they can talk to you about difficult topics as otherwise they will grow up learning that they cannot come to you with issues they want to talk about. Talking about your family situation with your child will help to build trust and confidence in your relationship with your child.

Do I have a Dad/ Mum?

Once young children start mixing with other children they usually realise that unlike themselves, some children live with, or have contact with, both their parents. This may bring questions from your child about their absent parent. You need to be able to answer any questions they have without making it appear to be a big secret that has been kept from them.

Where is s/he?

Young children need you to be creative when trying to explain where your child's other parent is, but you do not want to give them an answer which will leave them more confused. Use pictures to describe where s/he is or simply tell them that you do not know where they are if that is the truth. Young children are very resilient and can bounce back quickly from any upset. They are only seeking information at this stage; if their needs are being met and cared for by the resident parent they will not feel the need to have the other parent about. Sometimes, young children want and need information about their absent parent simply so that they can answer the questions of other children. Without this vital information the absence of one parent may become a sensitive issue for them and other children may be quick to pick up on this, making your child vulnerable to teasing or bullying.

How does Dad/ Mum feel about me?

Children nearly always think the best of their parents. When your child asks if their absent parent loves them or wonders how the absent parent may feel about them it is best to be positive. Replies such as 'I'm sure if they knew you like I do that they would think a lot of you' can be helpful for children as children have a need to feel wanted and loved. Keep the answer about the child and the parent and the relationship they may have had. If you make it about how you feel, the child will know this and doubt your reply. It is OK for you to have very strong negative feelings towards this person but that is your relationship with them and not the experience of your child.

Children may also ask if the absent parent loves the parent caring for the child. This can be very difficult and you need to think about your own child and what their need might be behind this question. If you feel that at one stage you did love this person then tell your child that but explain that you both wanted different things in life. If you never had a loving relationship with the other parent you need to be careful in explaining this as you do not want the child to feel you were troubled with an unplanned pregnancy - they may just really need to know that you love them dearly and you are very happy they are part of your life now.

Why does s/he not live with us?

Children need to know that there are all different types of families. Using books and films are good ways of letting children see that not all families have both mums and dads. You need to reassure them that they are part of a real family and that you are very proud of the family you have created. This in turn will give the child confidence in their family form and not leave them feeling that they are missing something crucial.

All my friends have dads/ mums, why can't I?

Again it is best to explain and help children to see that all families are different. Remember the question your child asks is about their need for information so don't make the issue about you or your own feelings about your family situation. You need to leave your feelings aside and answer the question with your child's needs in mind.

What is his/her name?

Young children may want to have basic information about their absent parent - their name, what they looked like, how you met and if they look like him/her. Give them all this simple information, so that they can identify their absent parent and their own sense of identity. They can be confident that they are the same as other children. As they grow they may want or need more details but only add little bits as you go along, according to their age and ability to cope with more complex information.

What does s/he look like?

Children often like to identify with parents. If your child does not look like you, you

need to help them understand why and who they may look like. Generally, people pick up on resemblances between children and parents, so it is a focal point that children pick up on too. You need to learn to be comfortable in telling your child that they look like their absent parent or have the same colour eyes/ hair as them. You do not need to make a big deal of telling them this, saying it in passing is important so children know it is OK to talk about these things. You can also use other family members in helping children form a sense of identity, such as telling the child they are very much like an aunt or granddad. You can draw pictures with your children and let them see who they look like in the family. This can also be a good opportunity to talk about the extended family of both parents.

Do I have relatives on my mum/ dad's side?

Tell children whatever you can about their extended family. In school this is always something that comes up; family trees are particularly common in schools around sacrament times such as communion or confirmation. Tell children about the relatives they look like so that they can draw pictures of family members which they can then keep and reflect on later when they need to.

Can I meet my mum/ dad?

If you have no contact with your child's absent parent, you need to be honest with your child and tell them that right now they can't meet their other parent. You can tell them that you hope they will get to someday but there is no point in creating false illusions. If you can arrange for your child to meet their other parent, then you need to think about writing to them and letting them know about your child's request. If they do not respond at least you did what you could and can explain that to your child when they're older, so that they never think you tried to prevent a meeting from happening. Children will have a different relationship with their parent than you had as a partner so there is no point in using your experience to shelter them, it will not benefit the child whatsoever. Children need to be given the opportunity to experience the relationship for themselves. You will need to support them in this relationship, always keeping it separate from your relationship with their other parent.

Can I meet my relatives?

Again if the answer is no, tell your child that it is not possible right now. But if it is possible then, again, you need to contact the family and ask them if it would be possible to arrange a meeting between them and your child. You need to keep your child's needs in mind and put aside your own feelings about their relatives; they are the child's relatives not yours. It is important to be very clear on what you are willing to do, because often the parents doing the caring end up really making everything happen for children. Be clear with relatives on what your child needs and be flexible in accommodating the needs of all involved but also take care of yourself in this situation. You can keep your relationship with your child's relatives business-like – it is your child who needs to form a relationship with them, not you.

Resources and activities

Shoe Box Mum/ Dad

For children with one absent parent, you can create a visual parent for the child in the following way. Children often have a need to feel close to those who created them. By having a box and placing things in it which have stories connected with the absent parent, you can create an image for the child of who this parent is and also give them the sense of this person as being real. You can put in photographs, or momentos such as a shell from the seaside, if you have a nice story about the parent connected to the sea. You can use drawings you have done with the child of the other parent with their name and physical features outlined. The idea is that as the child grows, they can get the box out and remember the stories connected to each thing and think of their absent parent. It is important to add to the box over time.

Books for parents and children

Do I have a Daddy? A story about a single parent child - Jeanne Warren Lindsay