

Children who don't feel listened to feel powerless and this can be a major influence on their feelings of self worth and their behaviour. Listening lets them know that they are cared about and that their point of view is understood. It helps them feel valued.

### Keep your child well informed

Children deal much better with situations if they have a clear explanation of what is happening and what is likely to happen. Parents should be direct and honest in telling children what is happening and why, in a way that children can understand. The worst course is to try to hush things up and to make children feel they must not talk or even think about what they sense is going on. Unpleasant happenings need explanation, which should be brief, direct and honest.

Children need facts, not negative emotions; they need

- to be given basic information in a way that they can understand
- to understand what is happening and what has happened
- to know that it is all right for them to love both parents

At the end of the day children

- want to know about their family situation
- need to be told as much as possible about their other parent
- need to know that they can ask questions, that they will be listened to, and that they will get an answer

Get a copy of **Family Links** - positive pointers for lone parents who are helping their children to understand their family situation - from **Treoir**. It's free.

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## Document 11.

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# Explaining Family Relationships

to children who are not living with both parents



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## Introduction

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Ireland ratified in 1992, states that if children are separated from their parents they have a right to know who they are and to have information on both parents and their relatives.

Children need to understand their personal history and their place in the world and so build up a coherent sense of identity. They need to understand their lives and to be able to give an account of themselves and their families. Without information on their other parent and their extended family, half of this history can be lost to them.

Family history and family trees are important because they tell us where we come from, the point of growth that we have reached, and with whom we are connected. For children who do not live with both their parents it is especially important to have information on both their birth parents and their extended families. The importance of information about both parents to children cannot be over emphasised.

## Talking to your child

Children generally want to know, and to know about, both their parents. They want to know what kind of a person the other parent is, their likes and dislikes, the kind of things they enjoy. They will also be curious about the relatives of their other parent. After all, they too are related to the children.

It is important, therefore, that your child

- feels free to talk about her/his other parent
- can ask questions and know that you can handle these without becoming upset yourself
- is aware that you can deal with queries as honestly and openly as possible in a calm way

You need to be ready to respond truthfully to such statements as

- "Daddy's gone"
- "Daddy doesn't love me anymore"
- "I don't have a Daddy"
- "I have a new Daddy"

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In talking to children about their other parent: be honest and truthful about

- why both parents are not living with them
- what the other parent is like
- who the biological father is, if you have a new partner
- who is mother and father and who is granny and granddad - if you are living with the extended family

Children have a great ability and capacity to deal with the truth, when it is gently and sensitively shared with them. Do talk about the other parent – their likes and dislikes, what they are interested in, who's who in the family etc.

## Answer questions truthfully and don't invent stories.

Start telling children very early on and in a simple way about the family situation and build up on this information as you go along. Very young children are usually satisfied with a simple explanation. The five to ten year olds need more details about the other parent - their age, appearance, health, interests and education, information on the other members of the family, etc.

Teenage children will need more detailed explanations and information about your relationship with the other parent.

Be positive about the other parent - s/he must have some good points! Even if you can't be positive - be neutral.

Tell relatives and staff at the nursery or school about your situation and what your children know. It is important that you are all dealing with the same facts. Other people will be better able to help if they know what you have told your child about the other parent. Ensure that your children know they can ask questions without fear of rejection.

## Listen to your child

One of the basic needs of all children is to feel they are being listened to. They need to know that their point of view is understood and accepted. They need time and space to express their opinions on what is happening.