

FACT SHEET 9

Tips for grandparents and other family/ whānau when there's been a separation involving children

Dependent children whose parents separate often end up stressed. They don't speak up for themselves and their emotional needs get forgotten.

These tips explain to grandparents and other adults in the extended family how to help parents meet their dependent children's needs.

Although we have used the phrase "your grandchild", the tips are written for all adults in the family/whānau to follow, not just grandparents.

1. You can help your grandchild better when you understand that –

- Your grandchild needs both their parents for life. The only relationship that has ended is the adult one between their parents.
- Your grandchild still needs to have the best relationship they can with both their parents.
- It's tough for your grandchild after their parents separate. What helps them through is to have really close, uninterrupted relationships with both parents.
- Your grandchild needs both their parents, even when one of them is not perfect or seems to have acted unfairly. The only exception is for safety.
- The reason your grandchild needs both their parents is –
 - For their self-esteem and mana.
 - To cope with life's challenges.
 - Family relationships and whānaungatanga.
- Parents often lose contact with their children because contact is made difficult for them. This would make separation much worse for your grandchild.
- Conflict between parents (fighting, arguing, going to court) can damage children.
- Your grandchild's relationships with their grandparents and other family/whānau on both sides are also really important to help them through.

2. Helpful things you can do

- Make your grandchild feel welcome to spend time with you so that they can have a pleasant and relaxed break from the stress at home.
- Let your grandchild (and their parents) know you are available to talk about how things are going, without putting them under pressure to answer questions.
- Encourage your grandchild to tell their parents what's important for them for the new living arrangements, including seeing family/whānau and friends.

- Support your grandchild's parents in making the best arrangements for your grandchild's needs, even when this is difficult because of emotional issues.
- Encourage your grandchild's parents to make a Parenting Plan to sort things out for your grandchild as soon as possible, before sorting money and property.
- Offer practical help to give your grandchild's parents a break during the times when one of them will be doing the parenting on their own.
- Think and act like a peacemaker. Suggest reasonable compromises.
- Encourage your grandchild's parents to resolve relationship issues, but always away from your grandchild. Suggest talking to friends or a free Family Court counsellor.
- Encourage your grandchild's parents to take good care of themselves, physically and emotionally.

3. What you can do to help when there's a new partner (and step-brothers and step-sisters)

- Encourage your grandchild's parents to have realistic expectations about new relationships.
- Find out what the difficulties are likely to be so that you can offer support*.
- Be as fair as you can between your grandchild and their new step-brothers and -sisters, especially when they are little, to avoid making difficult relationships worse!

4. Don't do these things out of loyalty to one of your grandchild's parents – they will make things worse for everyone

- **Don't** encourage one of your grandchild's parents to make it difficult for the other parent to see their child.
- **Don't** say mean things about one of your grandchild's parents in front of your grandchild. They feel a part of both parents and so feel put down as well.
- **Don't** keep talking about old negative relationship issues.
- **Don't** encourage either of your grandchild's parents to spend too much time concentrating on what they can't change after they've had a chance to work through their feelings.

Once the parents have had a chance to work through their feelings help them focus on the positives, like how they can be great parents to their children.

* See the handout 'New partners and step-families', available from the Parenting Through Separation programme provider; also available on the New Zealand Family Court website www.justice.govt.nz/family



This handout was written by Julia Maskill and Dr Kerry Gould for the Ministry of Justice (2007) and provides additional information to that provided in the free 'Parenting Through Separation' programme delivered for the Ministry of Justice. For details of programmes in your area phone 0800 211 211. There is more information available for parents who have separated from www.justice.govt.nz/family