

GIVING DIFFICULT MESSAGES

The Grandparents' Association frequently receives calls on its help line from troubled grandparents who are caring for their grandchildren, and are faced with the task of explaining to children why they are no longer living with their parent or parents. This often involves explaining, in terms the child or children understand, painful messages about parents or other family members. Doing this is not easy. We all want to protect our children, and giving a child difficult and unhappy information often causes great anxiety, and is emotionally demanding for a grandparent—or even a professional. The purpose of this leaflet is to try to make a difficult task a little easier by providing some guiding principles, so that it can be done in the best way that circumstances allow, to help both grandparents and grandchildren.

PREPARATION

Decide what you are going to tell the child, and how you are going to “tell the story”. The child may want to ask difficult questions - try to anticipate what these may be about. Discuss your likely response with others (eg the Help Line, someone you know who has experience of the dilemma, or a friendly professional). Get agreement from others closely concerned with the child.

HONESTY

Never tell the child lies or half truths.

DELAY

Do not procrastinate – put things off. Tackle the task as soon as possible. Sooner is much better than later!

CONTEXT

Try to arrange for the information to be given at a convenient time in suitable surroundings, eg story time, after school, in a quiet place; undisturbed with no interruptions (switch the mobile off!). Use bed time to make sure that the child has understood everything and is comfortable with what you have told them.

DIRECTNESS

Do not beat about the bush, but do not rush the telling, and be quite clear about how you are going to begin the telling.

YOUR OWN EMOTIONS

The subject may well be difficult for you too, and you should be aware of your own feelings, and it is helpful to get support from others who know the situation and can give you encouragement and understanding.

WHAT THE CHILD THINKS

Do not underestimate the child's capacity, or their knowledge of what has happened. Try to tailor what your telling to the child's interest – what the child needs to know.

AMOUNT OF INFORMATION

Do not over-egg the pudding! Especially with young children, giving all the information at one go may not be helpful. It is probably best to give the essential facts and leave it to the child to ask for more information. Return to the story at a later date if details need to be filled in. In other words, proceed at the child's pace, and his or her capacity to take all the information on board.

FAMILY SECRET

Make it clear to the child that this is not a taboo subject, and that the he or she can ask you about it at any time.

PRIVACY

Advise the child that it is better for him or her if some things are kept private within the family (beware of “show and tell” at primary school or nursery for example!).

TELLING OTHERS

If the information you have to give is particularly sensitive (eg father has killed mother) when the child has the facts take the school into confidence with the basic information – to avoid the child being asked difficult questions by a teacher or other students. Let the child know some of the facts, in order to maintain your child's trust and to show that some people need to know, while at the same time demonstrating that you will be open and not have ‘secret’ conversations behind your child's back.