Support during a parent separation

Parents can often struggle with making the decision to separate from their spouse due to worrying about the impact the divorce may have on their family. For parents of an autistic person there may be additional considerations.

Communicating the news that you and your spouse are separating may be incredibly difficult, and you may not know where to begin. What follows are some ideas for you to consider:

- Communicate in a way that makes sense to the person: Some people may prefer pictures, symbols, written stories, or verbal language. You could also use less conventional means like play, art, or drama.
- Encourage an honest and open line of communication before, during and after the separation: Acknowledge feelings and reassure the person, they may feel responsibility or guilt around the separation. You may need to prompt them to use support strategies such as emotional regulation techniques.
- Ensure your explanation is relevant: Your explanation should be developmentally appropriate; some people may need a simple explanation with little details whilst others may need a full explanation with lots of detail. When giving your explanation try to be as honest and objective as possible.
- Tell the person together: Sharing the news about your separation together with your spouse can set the tone. This shows your effort to work together and also ensures you do not give conflicting information. This also gives the person a chance to communicate questions at the same time. When having the discussion reinforce that you will always all be a family.
- Think about the language you use: When talking to the person about the divorce use concrete terms to explain what is going on, for example “Mum and Dad have decided they will always need to live in different houses.” Be careful with phrases such as "we are splitting up", as the person may not understand these abstract phrases.

- Recognise and acknowledge that this is a very difficult time for everyone: Reduce demands and spend time processing feelings and adapting to new ways of living.
- Preserve family traditions and create new ones as needed: For example, you might go out for dinner at the person's favourite restaurant every year on their birthday. Can you still do this or can both you and your spouse visit the restaurant with the person separately? Think about ways you could start new traditions.
- Communicate with professionals where possible: There may be some changes in the person's emotional wellbeing, making others aware ensures they are able to offer bespoke support.
- Minimise conflict between you and your spouse where possible: Although these times can be frustrating for you both, try and maintain a working relationship with each other. This can avoid the person feeling stuck in the middle or feeling the stresses that come from watching you both in conflict.
- Identify additional support: Parent separation is known as one of the biggest life-changes a person can go through, think about whether you may need to seek out additional support.

If you are sharing the care of your family member, they may end up spending time between two different homes. In this instance some considerations include:

- Involve the person in the process from the start if possible: In some instances, this may cause distress but for others having choice on the colour of the walls at their other home, the texture of the carpets or the smell of the air freshener may help to instil a feeling of control.
- Visually address changes: You could mark days on the calendar to show the person what day they will be staying where. You could also download our sheet: 'Who's house am I staying at?' This can provide a clear, visual representation of where the person will sleep.
- Create a visual story about the new environment: Take photographs of each of the different rooms and spaces and looking at this together before, during and after separation could really help.
- Create a feeling of safety by keeping boundaries and routines consistent between both environments: You may consider implementing some written/visuals rules, which both parents can use.

- Create a safe space in both environments: This may bring a sense of comfort and familiarity. You could do this by using a pop-up tent, a den in the garden or their own designated room, that's just for them.

- Use security objects: Some people will find safety and familiarity in everyday objects. You may want to introduce a transition toy / item that goes between the houses.