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Having a say ... when your parents separate

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Having a say

...when your parents separate
This book is about kids having a say when their parents separate. It is written by a group of children, young people and researchers who worked together on a project about why it’s important to listen to kids when their parents separate. Researchers also talked with parents and Family Relationship Centre staff about children having a say. The names in this report are not our real names but our stories are told from the heart.

If you want further information about the project you can contact Anne or Robyn at the Centre for Children and Young People. Anne and Robyn’s contact details are at the back of this book.
Having a say when your parents separate is something every child should have. In this book you will read about what we think having a say is all about. We also tell you lots of reasons why having a say is important.

Having a say is not about you making big decisions on your own. It’s about making sure you are part of decisions adults make. After all, the decision is about you! This does not mean it is easy to have a say or that you will always want to have a say. But asking kids their views recognises children have important things to tell their parents. In our experience, when adults listen to kids and take notice of what they say, better decisions are made - for everyone!

One way you can have a say is to talk with a Child Consultant at the Family Relationship Centre. Child Consultants are specially trained to be there for kids.

You can talk to a Child Consultant about how things are going for you or what might help you to live happily between two homes. They can also give you information. In this booklet we tell you why we think visiting a Child Consultant helps kids. We hope you will find the booklet interesting and useful.
So, what is having a say?

Having a say is about three important things:

1. Change
2. Choice
3. Relationships
Having a say is when you are listened to and your views are taken seriously when important things are being decided.

"Having a say is when parents do something after they’ve listened." — Nathan

"Having a say means knowing what’s going to happen. Deciding for yourself where you’re going to be or what you’re going to do." — Brooke

"Sometimes deciding." — Zac

"Asking kids about having a say is talking about the things we’d like to change - we’d like the plans of the places where we can go and stuff and schools and stuff." — Toby
Choice

Having a say means kids have choice. When parents are flexible, especially about day-to-day life, like going out with friends and sporting commitments, kids have choices.

"I think that parents should have a choice, we all should have a choice, like just a say. I would like to be treated like everyone else." — Timothy

"Having a say makes it a lot more flexible...it feels a lot better." — Toby

"Having a choice outweighs the guilt feelings that come up when you think that you’re hurting one of the parents." — Maddie
Relationships

Having a say is about family relationships. Like adults, children are trying to balance their own needs and wishes with what their parents would like to see happen.

“Children should have a say. The parents need their say as well.”  ❖ Cassie

“When kids have a say, it makes parents happy because they actually know what the kids are thinking.” ❖ Gabby

“Having a say is about responsibilities - you know, you can’t have freedom and no responsibilities or most of the time [you can’t just] say something and then just not take responsibility for it.” ❖ Nathan

“There needs to be flexibility and there needs to be balance.” ❖ Maddie
6 good reasons

...why having a say is important! Here are some thoughts.
1. There are benefits for kids
“It makes us feel more confident. If you keep it bundled inside, it’s not going to do anything. You need to tell someone before it washes away and goes really bad.” ~ Gabby

“Having a say feels nice. It feels like they’re listening to me and they’ve heard what I said. Even if Mum says, “Okay I’ve heard you and I’ll think about it.”” ~ Grace

2. Children learn how to have a say by having a say
“If kids are controlled all their life, they’re just going to go and screw themselves up, because one day they’ll be let free – they won’t have any boundaries and they’ll just go berserk.” ~ Nathan

3. Children have important things to say
“Children can definitely teach parents stuff about themselves.” ~ Maddie

4. Having a say helps adults to know more about children
“Having a say is important so that people know about what the child needs to do. If children are not asked then parents don’t know and so can’t solve the problem.” ~ Grace

5. Having a say helps kids better understand decisions
“Kids need to have a say but you know there’s things that kids don’t consider that parents do… so it helps you to know adult’s feelings too.” ~ Maddie

6. Not having a say has its problems
“Not being asked is pretty annoying – it feels a bit angry, because your parents are always telling you to speak up with what you want, but then when you do, it doesn’t really change anything.” ~ Toby

“Cranky and upset… I feel really bad and bothered and stuff.” ~ Cassie

“Really bad. I really get angry because they never listen.” ~ Zac

“It feels horrible.” ~ Timothy

“Kind of depressing. It kind of makes you feel like an outsider.” ~ Maddie

“Left in the dark I guess.” ~ Tex

“Bad and sad.” ~ Grace

“People get hurt, really badly, like really badly when [kids] don’t speak up and the parents don’t know what they’re thinking.” ~ Gabby
But, sometimes...

...having a say can be tough!
Sometimes…

...you can be scared of hurting your parents’ feelings

“Because it hurts parents’ feelings...like when there’s something on but my Dad asked to come over and I haven’t been there for a long time... it would probably be going to the other person’s house that I really wanted to go to but my Dad wanted to see me as well.”  ➤ Timothy

“Yes, like hurting their feelings or something.”  ➤ Cassie

“When you hear what the children want and it gets even more complicated. And you don’t want to hurt anybody.”  ➤ Brooke

“I worry...am I going to hurt Dad’s feelings? Am I not seeing him enough? He is my Dad. I should go see him, but he’s not the whole of my life. Do I want to go, I don’t have to go, does he want me to go, I do have a say.”  ➤ Ashleigh

...when you have a say, parents don’t take you seriously

“Definitely not taking kids seriously....you know people say, ‘Oh we can listen to them’ but then just discredit their ideas because there’s still that underlying idea that children don’t know what’s good for them. I know a lot of the time children get really bottled up and hidden and they just withdraw and don’t think they can show their feelings or their emotions or what they think.”  ➤ Maddie

“Sometimes you just get told, ‘Oh well, you know, you’ll be older soon and then you can choose where you want to live’. Sometimes you don’t even want that choice.”  ➤ Maddie

...you don’t even want to have a say or know what to say

“Sometimes, if you don’t know what you want to do... you want to stay and you want to go. But you don’t... can’t,...choose which one. Then it’s alright if they choose for you because you don’t have to make the choices yourself.”  ➤ Brooke

“It’s a relief not to have a say....”  ➤ Ashleigh
One way to have a say is to talk with a Child Consultant at the Family Relationship Centre. Here are some of the reasons why we think talking with a Child Consultant is a good idea.
1. You can be heard by your parents and let them know your views

“Basically, for me it was like what I wanted to say to my Mum and Dad which I couldn’t say to their faces, kind of thing. That was the main use, I guess, for me... I thought – well, this might be an opportunity to let Dad know a couple of things.” ± Nathan

2. The child consultant gives you helpful information

“I think [children] should be protected, but they should also be told so they can understand what’s going on around them. If they don’t know what’s going on and then they see their Mum and Dad having an argument or something, they could get really upset.” ± Zac

“It broadens your knowledge of what’s happening, and it helps to express yourself more openly... it helps a lot. It’s good – it helps you to think about things and you think about the situation and understand what the parents are going through. Gives a little bit of insight into what other kids are going through.” ± Jed

3. Child consultants help families make good decisions

“She said some things we could do to help us get through it.” ± Cassie

4. Child consultants are good to talk to

“I was shy, but I actually felt better when it was over, because I had all this stuff I needed to get out and stuff, and I don’t really have anyone to talk to, because sometimes I don’t feel like talking to Mum or Dad or anyone, and I just need to talk to someone that I don’t really know, but I can trust.” ± Cassie

“The reason was to talk about my family, what’s going on and if I wanted to talk about anything. And know that it’s not going to be told to anyone else. I wanted it all kept quite private. Most of it, or all of it. That would’ve been very important. It felt kind of nice, it felt good.” ± Timothy

“It’s just good just actually talking to somebody. Just telling them stuff... you could actually say what you wanted... and what was important to you and stuff.” ± Brooke

5. Child consultants are friendly!

“They were nice people, they’re friendly, if you talk to them they understand even if you say something that’s kind of rude. It felt very nice.” ± Timothy
We have written this book because we want you to know that having a say is important. It helps you to change things you are unhappy with or to understand better the things you can’t change. It helps give you choices and build strong relationships with both your parents. Having a say can mean better decisions are made and respects that you have important things to say.

We also want you to know that sometimes having a say can be tough. We know you do not want to hurt your parents or get hurt yourself. Sometimes you will not even know what you want to say.

One way to have a say is to talk to a Child Consultant. They can help you understand better what is going on, they can help your parents understand what you want and need, and they can help make good decisions for kids and parents.

We hope we have helped you too!
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The stories in this booklet were told as part of a research project about children having a say in Family Relationship Centres. In the early stages of the project children met with researchers and we talked about things such as what having a say is, why it is important and why it can be hard sometimes. Later, we met as a group so everyone could get to know each other and talk more about what this booklet should say.

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