

Together and apart

Children and parents experiencing separation and divorce

Concern about divorce and separation is partly fuelled by the rise in the divorce rate and the numbers of children affected by family changes. There is also growing concern about the role of fathers and the need for children to maintain a good relationship with both their parents. Recent years have seen the development of a growing range of services designed to help children and families experiencing these changes.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has supported a collection of research projects on children's and parents' experiences of separation and divorce. These studies have examined the outcomes for children of changes in their family circumstances, and what can help them at these times of stress. The research reports have also looked at the experience of separation for those who have been cohabiting as well as those who divorce, and at the impact of separation and divorce on fathers, as well as on mothers and children. Mavis Maclean, of the University of Oxford, summarises this research here.

- Researchers suggest the need to see parental separation not as an event but as a process which begins long before a parent departs and continues throughout childhood. They stress the importance both of making sure that children are told clearly what is happening and of listening sensitively to what children have to say about decisions which affect them.
- Separation for children can be particularly difficult when followed by a number of other changes to the family setting, for example where parents find new partners or where new children are brought into the household.
- Financial hardship and parental distress are also associated with continuing problems for children.
- Formal interventions need to be child-centred and available to all on the basis of need rather than civil status. However, many children seek better communication with and informal support from friends and family.
- We need to move on from seeing the children of divorced and separated parents as having an experience which is essentially different from that of other children. All children experience a number of transitions that can be difficult for them, and for which they may require additional support.
- A poor relationship between the separated parents is understood to add to the difficulties in establishing successful arrangements for contact between the child and the non-resident parent. However, there are also many practical issues that concern families on separation. Considerations such as housing and working hours can also be barriers to developing and maintaining contact

The policy landscape

In *Supporting families*, the first Green Paper on the family published by the Home Office in 1998, the Government set out as its mission statement: "The interests of children must come first". At a time of increased incidence of separation and divorce, it is important for parents to be able to care for their children even when they do not share a common household, to be able to adjust to periods of lone parenting, and to cope with new family structures when mothers and fathers form new partnerships and other children are brought into the household as either step- or half-siblings.

The policy goals set out in *Supporting families* aim to support parents undergoing family change in a number of ways. These include involving wider kin networks, improving advice and information services including financial advice, seeking a better balance between the demands of home and work, and supporting adult relationships. Marriage is seen as the preferred setting for bringing up children but, in the interests of the children, parenting in other settings is to be valued and supported.

The policy landscape is changing rapidly. In September 2003 the Government published a Green Paper, *Every child matters*, following the inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié. In his foreword, the Prime Minister emphasises that "for most parents, our children are everything to us". The paper proposes strengthening both universal services, such as schools and health and social services, together with targeted specialist services for children needing additional support. Planned legislation will create Directors of Children's Services, accountable for educational and children's services as part of 'children's trusts'. A Minister for Children, Young People and Families has been appointed, and there are proposals for a new Children's Commissioner. This legislation and ministerial change only affects England; Wales already has its own Minister responsible for children and young people and a Children's Commissioner. The new Minister in England is consulting on the extent to which the Green Paper will apply to frameworks already in place.

Box 1: The figures

The divorce rate rose rapidly between the mid-1960s and mid-1990s reaching 161,000 in 1997 and subsequently levelling out below 150,000 a year. Two-thirds of those divorcing, and an unknown but substantial number of those who separate after living together, have children under 16. It is more difficult to be precise about the numbers of separating cohabitants as the end of their relationship is not recorded in any public document.

The policy issues

Important policy questions have been challenging Government, voluntary organisations and those working with families. These are:

- Are children *negatively affected by separation or divorce*; if so, which groups of children?
- It is generally agreed that it is important for children to maintain their relationship with both parents. But, *how important is it that a non-resident parent has contact with their children when this is not welcomed by the parent with care nor by the children*, or where there are questions about inadequate parenting or domestic violence?
- *How should we support parents* both before and after they split up in their parenting roles and in dealing with the problems of parenting after divorce?
- *How can such help be best delivered* to parents and children?

Box 2: A focus on family change

Divorce or separation is only one of a number of changes to their family life which children undergo. New partners for either parent may have children already. There may be children from a new relationship, and there may be subsequent separations and other new partners. It is clear that multiple transitions, however well-handled, are difficult for a child to cope with. Interventions by Government or professionals can no longer focus on a single event, but need to support children throughout the many changes which take place in the course of family life.

Box 3: Recent policy developments

Attempts to encourage widespread use of mediation in divorce through the Family Law Act of 1996 failed. Subsequent government responses have been to pilot the idea of a 'one-stop shop' for advice. The Family Advice and Information Network (FAIN) will initially be based in solicitors' offices. In addition, the Government has tried to strengthen the Children and Families Courts Advice and Support Services (CAFCASS), to make it a broad-ranging advice service not focusing solely on divorce or other disputes. However, this has not yet been considered to be successful. Moving CAFCASS from the former Lord Chancellor's Department to the Department for Education and Skills may be helpful.

Findings from the JRF Programme

The findings from JRF research in this area throw light on these policy areas, and in particular on what needs to be considered in helping parents and children at times of family change.

Helping children

- At least one in three children will experience parental separation before the age of 16. Most of these children go through a period of unhappiness; many experience low self-esteem, behaviour problems, and loss of contact with part of the extended family. Children are usually helped by good communication with both parents, and most settle back into a normal pattern of development (Rodgers and Pryor, 1998; Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001). However, a small minority experience continued problems; sometimes these problems - including poorer employment prospects and family disruption - continue into adulthood. The factors thought to be associated with increased risk of poor outcomes following divorce and separation include financial hardship, high levels of parental distress, and experiencing more than one set of changes in family circumstances. For example, separation may be followed by a new relationship for either parent, which may in turn be followed by new step-siblings and by the birth of half-siblings to the child's parent and his or her new partner. These new partnerships may also end in separation; subsequently either parent may embark on a further new relationship involving step- or half-siblings.
- The quality of relationships between parents and children and between parents themselves is important in helping children adjust to life after separation (Hawthorne et al., 2003). Children also need to be informed of and involved in decisions about what happens in the family (Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001).
- Becoming part of a step-family seems to be helpful for younger children but to be harder for older children to adapt to (Hawthorne et al., 2003). Older children seem to appreciate step-parents more when they act in a supportive and friendly way rather than being involved in discipline or control.
- Wider kin networks, especially grandparents, can play an important part in supporting children and grandchildren around the time of separation (Perry et al., 2000; Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001). They are an additional resource when one parent is absent and the other is upset, and can communicate with their grandchildren while supporting their own child.
- Many of the researchers found that children had a range of different ways of coping and of needs for support and communication, which may be met in different ways (Hawthorne et al., 2003; James and Sturgeon-Adams, 1999; Trinder et al., 2002; Wade and Smart, 2002; Wilson and Edwards, 2003).
- Some children and parents need informal or professional help (Rodgers and Pryor, 1998; Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001; Hawthorne et al., 2003). In providing that help to children, we need to focus on the child's view of the world rather than being preoccupied by the breakdown in the parents' relationships as partners. We need also to be aware that - as well as parents - grandparents and friends are key figures for children (Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001).
- Services for children need careful evaluation to determine their effectiveness in supporting both children and their families and in promoting children's short-, medium- or longer-term wellbeing (Hawthorne et al., 2003; Wilson and Edwards, 2003; James and Sturgeon-Adams, 1999). Most studies to date have focused on children's and parents' satisfaction with services. There is a difference between a *popular* service, appreciated by the client, and an *effective* service, which leads to a measurable improvement in outcomes.
- Some studies have demonstrated that working directly with parents can be effective. Some children valued school-based services, which have the advantage of being available to all school-age children. Others, however, did not want to discuss their family situation in school, preferring to keep a clear distance between their home and school lives (Wilson and Edwards, 2003; Hawthorne et al., 2003).

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- Leaflets are often of high quality, but children may not use them. Newer communication techniques, such as websites and CD-ROMs, are being developed but, again, these are not widely used by children (Hawthorne et al., 2003).

Helping parents

Practical issues:

- At the time of separating, parents worry about practical matters such as housing and housekeeping rather than about more technical legal issues. They need practical as well as technical legal advice (Perry et al., 2000).
- Fathers face difficulties in organising contact when they have long or irregular working hours and accommodation which is not suitable for extended visits. Providing sufficient space to allow both parents to offer reasonable comfort on overnight stays for the children requires considerable resources (Lewis et al., 2002; Wade and Smart, 2002).
- Both parents may misunderstand the law on dividing assets and on paternal responsibility when a cohabiting relationship ends (Wade and Smart, 2002; Perry et al., 2000; Pickford, 1999).

Emotional issues:

- Parenting problems after separation are often related to the reasons for ending the relationship, particularly in cases of domestic violence, rather than to whether the separation followed marriage or living together (Wade and Smart, 2002).
- Working together as parents is hard where there is conflict in a relationship and even harder after separation or divorce. Arranging contact between the children and the non-resident parent requires a sustained effort by both parents. Non-resident parents must accept that their role has changed from when they shared a home with the child's; parents with care must accept that they need to actively facilitate contact arrangements, even if their own relationship with their former partner is not amicable (Trinder et al., 2002). Contact can be so conflicted that we may need to accept it may sometimes be necessary for the parents to go their separate ways at least for the time being (Trinder et al., 2002).

Fathers:

- There is public support for the move to conferring parental responsibility on fathers who are not married to the mother of their child but who register the birth of their child together (Pickford, 1999).
- Mothers can express strong feelings about the perceived immaturity of men as a cause of separation and about what they see as their own special role (Lewis et al., 2002). However, men's views on this can differ from those of mothers. (Wade and Smart, 2002; Lewis et al., 2002).
- Even where men have been closely involved with the child before separation they tend to become distant afterwards (Lewis et al., 2002; Buchanan et al., forthcoming).
- Fatherhood involves elements of accessibility, availability and responsibility. There is a pressing need to understand the difference between an adult-centred view of fathering and a child-centred view.

Conclusion

Key observations made by the researchers throughout the programme suggest the following:

- There is a need to see parental separation not as an event but as a process, beginning long before the actual departure of one parent and continuing throughout childhood. This experience is difficult for all, but particularly so for those families where other difficulties already exist. These might include financial difficulties or acute or prolonged parental conflict or distress. For children, separation is also particularly difficult when it is followed by a number of other changes to the family setting: for example, where parents find new partners, where new relationships with step- or half-siblings are involved, and where serial subsequent separations take place and serial new partnerships form. There seems to be a limit to the amount of change a child can cope with. This may be due to individuals' ability to withstand stress. But it may also be that such a high degree of change is likely to cause parents further stress: this may impair their relationship with the child, at least temporarily.
- As serial partnerships become more common, we need to move on from categorising the children of divorced and separated parents as having an experience which is essentially different from that of other children. It is time to recognise that all children can be expected to undergo a number of transitions in their family circumstances. We need to ensure that informal support from friends and relations is supplemented by easily accessible formal interventions to support those in particular need.

Box 4: Further research

The programme suggests we need to understand more about:

- Which children need help and what kind of help they want.
 - How effectively services support children and their families and promote children's short-, medium- or longer-term wellbeing.
 - The relationship between short-term distress and long-term outcomes.
- Formal interventions need to be child-centred and available to all, working through schools and through parents, on the basis of need rather than the civil status of the parents. Children's direct access to services – without being dependent on their parents for access – also needs further examination. The Green Paper, *Every child matters* (September 2003), highlights the provision of social and emotional support through the education system so as to offer a universal, non-stigmatised support service to all children as they experience a variety of personal stresses throughout their childhood. This may offer an opportunity to take forward this strategy.
 - Children have very diverse experiences: in designing services for them, one size will not fit all. We need to communicate with children and young people, taking account of their perspectives on what forms of support (both formal and informal) they would benefit from. There is also a need to distinguish between keeping children informed of what is happening in their lives, involving them in decision-making, and providing them with appropriate support.

About this *Foundations*

This *Foundations* was written by Mavis Maclean, Director of the Oxford Centre for Family Law and Policy in the Department of Social Policy and Social Work, University of Oxford.

This programme of research into the experience of children and parents of separation and divorce draws on a variety of methods. These include a systematic review of published work (Rodgers and Pryor, 1998;

Hawthorne et al., 2003), large-scale quantitative work (Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001), smaller qualitative studies which both raise questions and enrich understanding of the statistical big picture (Pickford, 1999; Smart and Stephens, 2000; Lewis et al. 2002; Wade and Smart, 2002; Trinder et al., 2002) and reviews of current service provision (Wilson and Edwards, 2003; Hawthorne et al., 2003).

How to get further information

The following reports are available from York Publishing Services Ltd, 64 Hallfield Road, York YO31 7ZQ, Tel: 01904 430033, Fax: 01904 430868, or through the Foundation's website, www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop. Where indicated, pdfs are available for download free of charge from the website.

Where indicated, a four-page summary of the *Findings* of the study is available from the Foundation, via our website www.jrf.org.uk or in print form by calling 01904 615905 or emailing publications@jrf.org.uk.

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Published by
Joseph
Rowntree
Foundation

The Homestead
40 Water End
York YO30 6WP
Tel: 01904 629241
Fax: 01904 620072
ISSN 1366-5715

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is an independent, non-political body which has supported this project as part of its programme of research and innovative development projects, which it hopes will be of value to policy-makers, practitioners and service users. The findings presented here, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation.

