

Supporting children through family change: a review of services

Most children and young people experience distress during periods of parental conflict and separation and a small minority experience long-term difficulties. Service providers in the UK are trying to address the needs of these children in a variety of ways. These services were surveyed as part of a project undertaken by the Centre for Family Research, University of Cambridge, and the Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. The findings of the survey are presented in the context of a review of the most recent research in relation to divorce and its impact on children. The researchers found:

-  Research on outcomes and children's views can tell us a lot about the types of needs that services supporting children should address.
-  The review suggested that of particular importance were the needs to: facilitate communication between children and their parents; help children to understand what is happening; and facilitate children's networks for support, including maintaining school and community links.
-  For parents it was important to help them manage and reduce conflict; to support them in their parenting; and to facilitate contact between children and non-resident parents.
-  The surveys of service providers found a variety of different types of provision which can be roughly divided between those that are directed at children and those aimed at parents.
-  However, parents were 'gatekeepers' for many of those services aimed at children.
-  There was also a lack of systematic evaluation of these services and so it is difficult to know what is proving effective.
-  The research also raised questions about the accuracy of the information available, the appropriateness of some of the information and support services and the extent to which access had been properly considered. The researchers conclude that an investment in evaluation is required for existing services alongside any investment in further resources or services. There is also a case for asking children what they would find helpful.

Introduction

The last few decades have seen an increasing number of services and interventions designed to mitigate the effects on children of divorce and separation. Factors that have contributed to this are the continuing high levels of divorce (and separation of cohabiting parents), combined with a developing awareness of the need to attend to children's well-being and rights in the process of family change. This research project aimed to map and critically assess current provision in the context of what we know about children's needs and wishes and of the effects of divorce and separation for children.

The research base for services

The review of research indicated that we know quite a lot about what might be helpful in supporting children. The researchers identified the following key areas that services supporting children need to address.

Facilitating communication

Separation is rarely a benign event for those involved. The distress and anger experienced by adults may make it difficult for them to support their children. If these feelings continue, they may pose a risk factor for children. In practice, parents often find it difficult, or feel it inappropriate, to tell their children what is happening or to involve them in decision-making in the belief that they are better protected from adult affairs. Research with children tells us, however, that they do want to know and, indeed, that they cope less well to the extent that they are kept in ignorance than if they have appropriate and sensitive information and involvement.

Helping children to understand

Related to the above are children's perceptions and understanding of what is happening, and their ways of coping. Whilst children's responses to family transitions are diverse, it is possible to identify qualitative differences in children's levels of understanding at different ages and these differences need to inform any services aiming to help children cope with family change.

Facilitating children's networks for support

Research confirms that children seek and gain support from people outside the immediate family and that grandparents are commonly involved. Contact with paternal grandparents often reduces at the time of separation, yet they are a potential source of help for children that can be encouraged. Peer contact is also important.

Maintaining school and community links

Continuing links between parents and schools and other community groups are also important, according to research. In practice it is often difficult for parents to maintain these after separation; however, to the extent that they can be helped to do so, their children will benefit.

Conflict management and reduction

The impact of conflict before, during, and after divorce emerges as particularly important in the research focusing on the longer-term well-being of children. Parents may need help to avoid directly involving children in their arguments. The extent to which parents are able, or are helped, to reduce their conflict and to keep it away from children is crucial for children's coping and well-being. Children can also be helped by practical strategies to help them to manage parental conflict and distress.

Parenting support

The quality of parenting by resident parents commonly reduces at times of family change, yet research demonstrates it is a pivotal aspect of children's well-being.

Facilitating contact with non-resident parents

The evidence from what children say, and from research on outcomes, strongly indicates that contact and good relationships with non-resident parents are critical aspects of post-separation life. However, for a variety of reasons contact between children and (non-resident) fathers reduces considerably after separation. To the extent that fathers can act as effective parents to their children, i.e. provide support, monitoring and 'good enough' parenting, both fathers and children will benefit. The same holds true for non-resident mothers.

Services and interventions

The survey identified two broad categories of services and interventions. There were those which aimed to aid communication with children, their understanding of the situation and offered them support, including telephone helplines and email, booklists and books, audio-visual materials, CD-ROMs and games. These are described in detail in the report and, where it is possible, the researchers have suggested the factors that are likely to be important for the service to be of most help to children (and/or their parents) who need it.

A second category of services and interventions was those directed at parents but aiming to support and improve parent-child relationships. These were

concerned with conflict management, parenting support and contact with non-resident parents and included divorce mediation, classes and information sessions, leaflets and contact centres.

Parents as 'gatekeepers'

Whilst research suggests that children may benefit from interventions that help adult relations during and after separation, children may still have separate needs for support.

Parents are often 'gatekeepers' for their children in determining what, if any, access their children will have to information and support services. For instance, some leaflets for children are distributed to parents (for example, through the courts or solicitors offices) to pass on to their children, but research shows that most leaflets given to parents are not passed on. Other services aim to support and help children through an influence on their parents.

Using parents to access children also reflects a prevailing 'caretaker' view of childhood. Although researchers and service providers have united in arguing that children have a right to be involved in decisions and that children have the capacity to act as agents in their own lives, few support services embody these ideals in the way they are currently designed. On the other hand, well-advertised services that aim to reach children directly, such as the telephone helpline, Childline, are very widely used by children.

Evaluation

There is a growing consensus, largely based on research, about what types of interventions parents and children would benefit from, and also on the need for various forms of dissemination. However, this research found a lack of systematic evaluation of interventions that are currently available. Many organisations duplicated information produced by other organisations, and there was often no assessment of the benefits or otherwise of specific materials used. Evaluations were often based on retrospective accounts from people looking at how helpful certain information or services were for them. Such approaches ignore issues associated with distribution and uptake of services. Many programmes relied simply on participant feedback as a means of evaluating the interventions, with no comparison group, and so non-participants were not included.

Access, appropriateness and accuracy

In the survey the researchers looked at access, appropriateness, and accuracy of services and interventions as these appear to be important in

ensuring that information and services reach their target audiences, are addressing specific concerns and are credible.

- **Access.** In many instances it was unclear how leaflets etc. were actually being distributed. Others were only available at the point of divorce itself, which will be of little help to those needing information or advice in the early stages of separation or divorce. Access to web-based services could also be problematic due to the necessity for specific software and the varying abilities of search engines to identify particular sites. Counselling and mediation services are only available to a small minority of children and are usually dependent on parental initiative and involvement. Access to services varies widely depending on locality.
- **Appropriateness.** The survey found many examples of leaflets that were aimed at different ages, taking into account their level of understanding. Gender was less often addressed and apart from the inclusion of some multi-cultural images of children, there appeared to be little recognition of ethnic or religious differences in the divorce experience. This may reflect financial constraints but is clearly an issue that merits further exploration.
- **Accuracy.** As well as the need for advice to be grounded in research, information regarding telephone numbers, addresses, websites etc., need to be checked and regularly updated. Several examples were found of information being provided which was inaccurate and out of date or which incorporated careless mistakes that could detract from the overall message being given and its usefulness.

Conclusions

Research suggests that provision designed to support children through family change should consider these aims:

- providing someone to listen to children's views and experiences and support them and their parents in continuing to talk at difficult times of family change;
- helping children to understand the processes they and their parents are going through;
- encouraging children to seek support from extended family members and friends;
- enabling children and parents to continue links with schools and community groups after divorce and separation;

- enabling children to understand and manage conflict – and support parents to manage conflict;
- supporting parents so as to reduce stress, encourage warmth, nurturing and monitoring of children;
- facilitating contact with non-resident parents unless there are good reasons for this not to happen.

The survey identified a considerable volume of potentially useful programmes but very few had been effectively evaluated. In the absence of routine evaluation of services, we cannot guess which interventions, in which combinations, are most effective. It is likely, however, that a mixed strategy is likely to be most effective rather than relying on one approach, given the varying needs and situations of children.

There is also a good case for asking children of separating parents about the kinds of support that they would find helpful and for surveying them about how they access services and interventions to help the development of services. Services for children are often set up and designed without consulting the children who might use them.

The researchers suggest that the following questions need to be answered for all programmes:

- Are the aims of the programme specified?
- Are the aims of the programme based in research?
- Does the content of the programme reflect its aims?
- How do children or parents gain access to the service?
- Are personnel involved appropriately trained?
- Is the programme age-appropriate?
- Is the programme culturally or religiously appropriate?
- How do we know the programme has reached the children or parents who need it?

About the project

The research was based on a review of research and surveys of organisations providing services to children and families. The survey took place in 2000 and 2001, and it is possible that other interventions and services may be available that have been developed since then.

The review included research on children's views of family change and on outcomes. The research also involved a screening questionnaire sent to 172

organisations (with a response rate of 75 per cent). A second, more detailed, questionnaire was sent to those providing services for children from divorcing or changing families.

These questionnaires asked about the relevant categories of services and interventions listed by each organisation. Of the original 129 organisations that replied, 84 (65 per cent) gave relevant information. Therefore, out of the original 172 organisations contacted, 49 per cent said they provided services for children experiencing divorce and family change and provided details of these.

How to get further information

The full report, **Supporting children through family change: A review of interventions and services for children of divorcing and separating parents** by Joanna Hawthorne, Julie Jessop, Jan Pryor and Martin Richards, is published for the Foundation by YPS as part of the Family Change series (ISBN 1 84263 073 3, price £16.95).