Facing family change
Children's circumstances, strategies and resources

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All the names given to the children in the report are inventions. To protect their anonymity, each child chose a fictitious name. As children opted for names that appealed to them, they do not always reflect ethnicity (although in most instances they do).

1 Introduction

Increases in the rate of family 'breakdown' have generated widespread concern about the 'harm' which this does to children. Until recently, research has focused almost exclusively on investigating the effects of parental separation on children's social, emotional and behavioural development, and its implications for their future well-being (Rodgers and Pryor, 1998). Although large-scale studies now indicate that a majority of children cope reasonably well with family reordering and continue to function in the normal range (Joshi, 2000; Hetherington and Kelly, 2002), there has remained considerable anxiety about the upset and distress which might be caused by talking about this issue with children themselves. Researchers have preferred to collect their data indirectly, relying on reports from parents, teachers and clinicians, or administering standardised tests. Parents, too, have been reluctant to see their children involved directly in research (Smart *et al.,* 2001). As a result, there have been few studies which have looked at family reordering from children's own perspectives (Pryor and Rodgers, 2001). Moreover, children have remained locked in a construction of family change which situates them as passive victims who neither act upon nor influence their circumstances. Current developments in the social study of childhood are, however, challenging these ideas (James and Prout, 1997; Smart *et al.,* 2001). By showing that children are active social agents, capable of thinking for themselves, sociology is making it possible for us to look at children in new ways and is opening up research into children's views of their lives, including their experiences of separation and divorce. As a contribution to these developments, this study explores the perspectives of five- to ten-year-old children on managing the family changes which accompany a parental separation.

Aims, objectives and design of the study

Our aim was to listen to children's views on parental separation and to discover their preferred means of support during times of family change. We focused on children aged between five and ten years as they are under-represented in what research there is on children's perspectives on divorce. The study was carried out in four stages, the first two of which were conducted in four primary schools, where our main sample population was recruited.

- In the *first stage* of the study, we explored the views of all the children in Year 2 (aged six to seven years) and Year 5 (aged nine to ten years) of the four schools, irrespective of their family circumstances. Our objective was to familiarise ourselves with their ideas about what it would be like to live through a parental separation; in particular, what its challenges might be and how these might be dealt with. The children were interviewed in small focus groups where issues were explored from a generalised or hypothetical perspective. No attempt was made to explore children's personal experiences during this stage.

- We then moved on, during the *second stage*, to conduct individual interviews with children with some experience of a separation. We deliberately did not say that we wanted to talk to children whose parents had *divorced* because we wanted to find out how relevant 'divorce' is in terms of the reality of children's lives. By defining separation as meaning parents who have 'split up' or who live apart, we hoped to capture a representative range of experiences. The objective of this second stage was to explore the children's perceptions of the family transitions which they had lived through, and to discover whether they had wanted, or received, any help in adjusting to the changes which they experienced. Among other things, we sought their views on formal and informal support, notably the

parts which can be played by other family members and friends, by schools, and by organisations such as Family Mediation or the Family Court Welfare Service (now part of CAFCASS – the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service).

- The *third stage* of the study was designed to supplement Stage Two. We anticipated that many parents of children interviewed in school would have negotiated the terms of their separation informally without recourse to mediation, or there being any necessity for a welfare report. As we wanted to ensure that we spoke to some children whose views on their parents' separation had been sought for legal purposes, or who had been referred for professional help in adjusting to them living apart, we recruited (with the help of outside organisations) a small community-based sub-sample of eight children.

- The *fourth stage* of the study was designed to enable us to contextualise the study findings. We visited 12 projects set up by the Family Court Welfare Service, Family Mediation and voluntary organisations. These were all innovative schemes but differed considerably in their emphasis and focus, allowing us to review child mediation schemes, information workshops, support groups and individual counselling, and to discuss a range of working practices.

The children and their schools

Our study drew its main in-depth interview sample of children from four primary schools in Yorkshire. We have called these Brookside, Elm Hill, New Hackney and Woodforde.

The schools we selected were chosen to reflect differences in class, religion, ethnic mix and urban/rural location. The reasoning that drove this core selection was based on the idea that we wanted to interview children who were likely to have different life chances, or what might be called differential access to cultural capital (Coleman, 1988). Thus Elm Hill was located in a small thriving market town which was closely bordered by fields and farms. This was the largest of our schools with 368 pupils on roll. The area was one of low density of minority ethnic families (99 per cent white) and with low divorce rates compared with more urban regions in Yorkshire. Housing composition in the area was almost exclusively owner-occupied (80 per cent) with hardly any social housing (15 per cent) and virtually no private rented sector. It could be called middle England – except that it was in the North. We hypothesised that relatively few children from this school would have experienced divorce. In such a situation, children might find it hard to come from what might be perceived as a 'broken home' and they might find that few of their friends had similar experiences. We were interested therefore to discover how the children managed the transition their family was going through and what resources they could draw upon in the cultural milieu of their school.

We selected Woodforde school with the same principles in mind but in this instance we sought a school with a clear sense of community and religious adherence. We chose a Jewish school in a pleasant suburb of a large city. Here, too, we were interested in the cultural milieu of the school and the extent to which it might (or might not) provide a supportive context in which divorce and other forms of family transitions could be handled by the children. The school had 295 pupils on roll. Because it was a single-faith school, it drew children from families outside its immediate catchment area. The children came predominately from economically advantaged or at least financially secure families but it also included some economically disadvantaged children too (see Figure 1).

Brookside school represented a traditional white working-class area in an outer suburb of a large city. There were 215 pupils on roll. Housing stock in the area was predominantly (51–60 per cent) low-

Figure 1
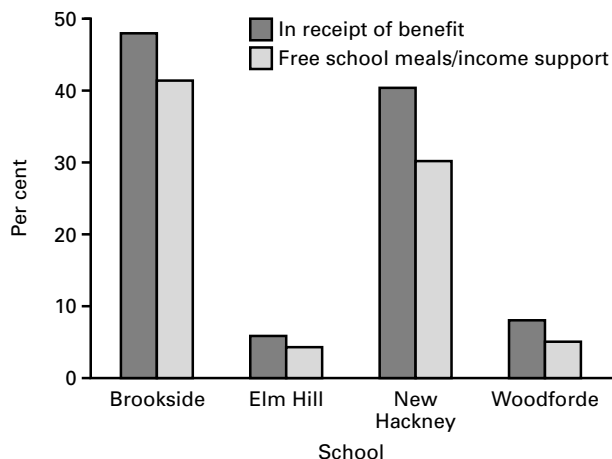
rise, social (or former social) housing built in the interwar period. Nearly 50 per cent of the pupils' families were in receipt of some kind of benefit and 41 per cent of the children were in receipt of free school meals (see Figure 1). Few families in the area came from minority ethnic groups because, although there were clusters of streets with approximately 4–8 per cent of minority ethnic families, a substantial part of the catchment area of the school itself was exclusively white. This led us to believe that there would be something of a homogeneous culture in the school and that this might influence children's experiences of living their family lives in the area. We also recognised that in this school divorce and separation would not be unusual.

Finally, New Hackney was the most diverse school of all. We selected an inner-city school in a deprived area with a relatively high density of children from minority ethnic families. Notwithstanding its inner-city status, this school had a lower percentage of parents receiving

benefits than Brookside (see Figure 1). There were 227 pupils on roll. Housing tenure in the school's catchment area was predominantly local authority or privately rented. The majority of minority ethnic families in the wider area were defined as Pakistani but the school itself had a mixed ethnic profile with children of refugee families in attendance. New Hackney was a very community-oriented school with special classes and provision for parents. It was unlike the other three schools, however, in that it did not have a clear defining feature beyond its inner-city milieu and its cultural diversity.

The study findings

- The first section of the report (Chapters 2–3) focuses on diversity, highlighting differences in the children's family arrangements, the quality of their relationships with their parents, and their social circumstances and life chances.

- The second section (Chapters 4–7) examines the children's coping strategies when faced with family change and the resources available to help them. Here, we concentrate on the role of friends, of schools and of formal support.

- Finally, we conclude by summarising a number of issues that have relevance for policy or practice.

- An outline of our sampling procedure and research methodology is given in the Appendix.

2 The children and their families

When we started this research project we decided to reach children through schools because this route promised the most opportunities for contacting a diverse range of children. As we explain in Chapter 1, we first held sessions with small groups of children from each class and we then carried out more in-depth interviews with individual children. We selected children we knew had experienced some kind of family transition for our interviews but because we required parental consent and the consent of the children themselves we were not able to interview all the children in each class of five year olds and nine year olds whose parents may have separated. Notwithstanding this, we are confident that, in broad terms, the children we interviewed were 'typical' of their other classmates in relation to matters such as economic resources, housing and educational level. We did not, for example, speak only to the minority of disadvantaged children in the more prosperous schools, nor did we speak only to the most articulate and competent pupils in the less advantaged schools. As we had expected, we found that the notion of family transition or 'breakdown' is highly varied. For some children, this was experienced as a major trauma which challenged their expectations of their family lives and relationships; for others, it was only one of many changes and adversities. In this chapter, we discuss the children's experiences of family transitions in terms of four distinct constellations of family and parenting arrangements which we found and which we refer to as *aggregated*, *divorced*, *meshed* and *diasporic* families. We feel confident that in drawing a composite picture of 'types' of family we are not distorting the children's experiences. There is one proviso to this, however. Any form of typification involves a degree of oversimplification and, of course, a significant element of interpretation by the researcher. We therefore offer these characterisations as a form of cognitive map, rather than as a final description. Our purpose is to convey the core elements so that the reader can capture a sense of the essential differences between the experiences of groups of children. Thus, not every child 'fits' our picture, but the characterisation is a starting point from which a more subtle or nuanced understanding can evolve. Our typifications are also drawn predominantly from the narratives of the children. So this is a sociological classification with its foundations in children's worldviews. We have treated seriously what they saw as important. If issues recurred in their stories (even if – indeed especially if – they were not issues we were originally looking for) we have taken them as core defining features for our subsequent analysis.

Aggregated families

On the basis of children's descriptions of their families and the changes they had experienced, and the accumulation of step-siblings and new kin, we defined this first group of families as *aggregated families*. These children's experience of parental divorce or separation did not fit what we refer to as the dominant model. The dominant model assumes a nuclear family where the parents, having been married for some years, 'decide' to divorce thus introducing a major change into their, and their children's, lives. For the children with aggregated families, the separation of their parents was often only one major event in a life that was already full of fluctuations and change. These children might already have spent time living with another relative or even with a foster carer. Their mother might have been separating from a 'stepfather' rather than their biological father. They might be living in a household with lots of siblings and step-siblings, some of whom would be in contact with their real fathers and others who would not be. The families could be described as complex in the sense that we have come to expect that 'proper' family life should be modelled on a very narrow range of biological

kin with its base in marriage.[1] Even though this may not be the experience of a great many families, culturally we seem now to expect this kind of simple model (see 'divorced families' below). We expect that where a man and a woman co-reside then the children in the household will be their, and exclusively their, biological children. Where this is not the case there is a tendency to feel that such families are breaking fundamental rules of kinship. Even where the children themselves seem perfectly comfortable with the arrangement, the language they are obliged to use forces them into a 'realisation' that their family structure is 'abnormal':

Q: *So you call them mum and dad. Yes? You know you said he's not your real dad, you've got somebody else who's your real dad, is he real dad for any of your brothers and sisters?*

Danni (5): *Yeah, he's for my little brother Dave. My* [social] *dad is Dave's real dad as well. Me and Phil shared a* [real] *dad each, and Amber and Stella shared a dad, and Aubrey just shared his dad by himself.*

Some children broke these rigid rules of kinship themselves simply because they came to love a social father or another child more than their immediate biological kin:

Joely (9): *And then my stepdad brought me up as a real dad. That's why I call him dad. I don't call him stepdad or Thomas any more because I like it calling him dad, because if I do call him Thomas it's really upsetting because I won't have a dad to call dad will I? ... He's really kind and he never smacks me. He never smacks any of the other children.*

Joely would not call her 'real' father dad but insisted on using his first name. In the household she lives in she has four half-siblings by two different fathers. The man who is social father to all these children and who has lived with her mother for several years is not actually biological father to any of them. Joely also has two half-siblings on her 'real' father's side. They live with her father and his new partner (i.e. not their biological mother). Joely refuses to see her 'real' father any more even though she once wanted to find out more about him (see Chapter 3).

Claiming non-kin as kin could also happen in a horizontal way. So children would not always want step-siblings to be thought of as 'step' and half-siblings were thought of mainly as full-siblings.

Q: *And is she a real sister?*

Lucy (8): *Well, we like to pretend we are sisters so it doesn't get us upset and my mum said to me, 'It's like you've both been sisters because you've lived together since ...', I were only six when Emma came to live with me ... She used to tell me what it* [not living with her mother] *was like and now that I have got older we tell each other every day nearly about.* [Emma and Lucy are cousins]

In addition to these relatively complex family arrangements, the lives of many of these children could be described as being at risk from a range of potentially adverse events beyond their control. Three of the children had fathers who were (or had been) in prison, one additional father was involved in criminal activity ('nicking things'), it seems possible that some fathers were involved in illicit drug use and one child had a much older brother who had died in gaol. Social workers and police officers were features of their lives, even if they did not intrude directly into their own households:

Sam (6): *At my house someone died. Some nasty people came and hit Patrick on the head, the back of the head, there* [demonstrates]. *He played music in the pub and it got me to sleep but he doesn't now, 'cos he died.* [Sam lives in a flat over a pub.]

Lee (9): *My dad didn't move out, the coppers took him out. He got accused of armed robbery and he keeps, he's moved prison now ... Coppers broke me dad's knuckles and wrists, you know, putting handcuffs on him. And they took him and said, 'That's it', and put him in prison.*

Family violence was also virtually a defining characteristic for almost a half of these children. Sometimes it was directed only at mothers by fathers, sometimes it was directed at children as well and sometimes it was mothers who were violent towards the children. These children often took hitting and slapping for granted as normal forms of parent–child interaction but, in some cases, it was clear from the way that the children spoke that some forms of hitting went beyond this:

Dale (5): *Only times I don't love my mum is because she hits me all t'time.... Lisa* [adult sister] *'s all right. Lisa don't hit me all t'time ... Our Conrad* [older brother] *punches me. One day Conrad kicked me in't eye and punched me in't nose ... and I had a black eye and a black nose, and blood was dripping down ... When I'm back* [with dad] *I'm safe.*

Joely (9): *My dad went to prison when my mum was pregnant and she broke up with him because when she was pregnant he kept beating her up.*

Divorced families

It was clear from our individual interviews and from the general tenor of the group sessions that children whose families have been grouped in this category felt that they inhabited a safe personal space. Their lives did not seem to be precarious nor potentially fraught with trauma or upheaval. In the group discussions, it was clear that they were familiar with adult anger and arguments, but they did not use the language of physical chastisement in anything like the same way that the children from some of the aggregated families did. If something like a drunken episode occurred it was experienced as shocking and frightening, rather than fairly common. Of course, this does not mean that unpleasant events never happened. We have to acknowledge that children might have opted to keep quiet about such events because they would have been seen as shameful or dishonourable. But, even if this was the case, there was still an important distinction to be made between the broad situational contexts and value systems in which these two sets of children were being brought up. Six-year-old Sophie, for example, recounted how her father had indulged in outbursts of destructive, drunken violence at the time of the separation, some of which she had witnessed and which she had found extremely frightening. However, the violence had been directed at objects, not at people. Subsequently, she was able to hold these upsetting memories in balance with more positive ones. Her father proved reliable and caring during contact visits, and showed himself to be committed to their relationship:

Sometimes I ring him up. And other times I just read his letters and postcards he sends me. Whenever, like, we go to a castle or somewhere [during contact visits] *we get a postcard and then I write in it or he writes in it. And if I forget it he sends it.*

We have identified the main characteristics of the sort of family transitions that this group of children experienced as straightforward *divorced* families. By this we mean that the typical experience seemed to be one where parents were married and cohabited for a period of time, raising their children. They then ceased to be happy together and decided to divorce / separate. On parting, the parents invariably remained in touch with their children:

Adam (9): *On Tuesday I have to go swimming so I come round here* [father's house] *at about 6 o'clock and come back* [to mother's] *at about 8 o'clock. On Wednesday he normally does not come to get me because I've got to go to band practice, so that's why I normally go on Tuesdays. Originally, when we changed the days, my mum went to college on Tuesdays and Thursdays and I used to go Wednesdays so I did not see my mum for three days, so we changed it for Tuesdays so that I could see my mum on Wednesday.*

It was rare for there to be more than two full-siblings in these families and the children were much less likely than those in our first category to have step- and half-siblings. Of course, the mothers in these families might well have gone on to repartner and have further children, but if so this was in the future for most of the six and nine year olds we spoke to. The households were less densely populated than those of aggregated families. However, for these children, grandparents were also important figures. In two cases, mothers had moved back to the area to be with their parents and, for others who had not left, their maternal grandparents were close by anyway.

With these families we did not find any incidence where step-parents replaced biological parents in children's affections. Their parents' new partners may have been really important to them but they tended to be depicted as additional kind or useful adults rather than as substitutes. All of these children had found the period of the divorce distressing and 'sad', and a few had been very frightened because of the behaviour of a parent, but for the majority their family situation had settled down again and found a new equilibrium.

Meshed families

This group shares the characteristics of the divorced families, above, but is distinguished by the quality of the relationships between the children and their parents, and also with wider kin. In many families, including those we have called 'divorced', we gained the impression that children's lives and parents' lives were separate, parallel existences. Children could be acute observers of the activities and relationships of the adults with whom they lived. Nonetheless, there was a sense in which they occupied worlds which, whilst revolving around each other, remained distinct. This was evident, too, in relation to grandparents or wider kin, who sometimes provided practical, emotional, or economic assistance, but had their separate lives and preoccupations. In the case of the families we turn to now, there was much more meshing of the generations. The children, especially the girls, seemed to have a great awareness of the emotional lives of their parents, and particularly their mothers – not because their mothers treated them as adults or even as friends – but because there seemed to be a particular interest and investment in the lives of family members across generations.

We have classified the families as *meshed*. By this we mean that emotions and feelings were not suppressed and the children, but especially the girls, were emotionally literate and articulate beyond other children in our sample:

Miriam (10):   *I think my dad misses out. I
sometimes feel sorry for him. My
mum has moved to Greystoke, got
this new life and a load of new
friends and sometimes I feel my dad
has been left behind and stuff.*

Although there was much indication of family
rows and difficulties in this group, there was no
suggestion of domestic violence, nor of violence
towards children. Family life was lived with
passion, at good times and at bad. The extended
family (particularly grandmothers and
grandfathers) could be very significant. In one case
it was the interference of the extended family that
caused the parents to separate, although later they
got back together:

Sasha (10):   *My mum's always the first one on
the dance floor. She's not old-
fashioned or anything, she is a really
cool mum ... There was a period of a
couple of months last year when
mum and dad, they were having a
really hard time and mum went to a
friend's. They were fighting every
night loads and ... we didn't like it, it
was really horrible, because there
were problems with the family. My
dad's side of the family were really
being rude to my mum's side ... And
they were fighting over that. So mum
went to her friend's house for a
couple of months ... I was afraid she
wouldn't ever come back and my dad
wasn't coping very well. And I mean,
I wasn't coping very well either ...
And then she came back and they
took a really long holiday together, so
that was okay.*

Grandparents, too, were closely involved in the
affairs of the immediate family, providing children

with a source of support but without disguising
any partisan feelings which they felt:

Miriam (10):   *We used to have a little saying that
we used to say to my grandma when
things got really horrible, we used to
say 'Can I sleep at your house
tonight?' and she used to go, 'Well,
go on then, fine' ...* [But sometimes
she] *used to slag off my dad. That
was really horrible ... She shouted at
me if I said 'I hate mummy for
messing up this family. I hate daddy
for messing up this family', and all
this. She'd start yelling and say it was
all dad's fault.*

In these families children were highly attuned
to those around them. There was much interest in
their parents' lives and, where parents had
separated permanently, in their new relationships,
and the arrival of new children.

Diasporic families

As we have explained in Chapter 1, we were
seeking to interview children whose families had
gone through important transitions and changes.
We did not specify only divorce, not least because
we did not want possibly to stigmatise a particular
group of children in the school, but also because we
were aware that divorce is a culturally specific form
of family transition. It is also an 'adult'-oriented
definition which implies that divorce is the only, or
most problematic, form of change that occurs in
families. With this fourth family typology, a
different picture emerged which was much harder
to classify. None of the accounts formed an obvious
pattern beyond what we have identified as
resembling a small diaspora.

By this we mean that a common factor for many
of the children was an episode when a parent would
leave the family, only to return later, or where there

was 'no change' yet kin were dispersed. In the case of a Pakistani girl, her father took her older brother to Pakistan for a year. Obviously she understood that he would be coming back, but during that time she missed her father and brother. Their absence did not simply mean an emotional loss but altered the dynamics of family life, as her father was the main authority figure in the household:

> Yasmin (6): *It was like my little brother wasn't scared now, because you know why? Because if he's not good my dad usually hits him. So he wasn't scared then ... When we go in the shop, right, he starts to scream in the shop and says, 'I want that thing' ... And sometimes when he goes outside he throws* [his toy] *on the corner and it goes in the gutter.*

A ten-year-old boy called Chaney had never lived with his father, although he had seen him regularly until a year previously when the father moved away for his job. Chaney remained living with his mother and two half-siblings, and kept in touch with his father by letter. Ellie, who was ten, had a father who left her mother for another woman with whom he had two children. He then returned to her mother and has stayed ever since. His two youngest children come to visit and stay with the family. Nadine's father was living in Africa and she had been brought to England by her grandmother to live with her mother and cousin. In Kelsie's case, her parents often rowed and split up for a few days, but then managed to get back together. She felt that her family might be on the brink of a divorce or separation from time to time. Finally, Makeda described a long-standing relationship between her parents which was occasionally violent but also involved mutual support:

> Makeda (6): *I've got a dad but he doesn't live with me ... We kind of see him every day. We come and look around and then we have a hug and a kiss and then we go back home. We wouldn't want to stay there because there's no TV ... He wants to get some more money 'cos mummy's running out of money.*
>
> Q: *So does he help your mummy?*
>
> Makeda: *Yes. Sometimes when he comes around. Sometimes he gives mum some money ... When we moved into the new house he decorated with mum.*

Some of these differences clearly reflect cultural differences. It is not at all unusual for Pakistani fathers to take their children back to Pakistan for a period, nor is it unusual for African children to come to England during their school years and then perhaps to settle permanently (especially if their families have refugee status). It may also be the case that more parents are opting to 'live together apart' although we do not yet have statistics on this potentially new pattern of household formation. These mini diasporas of family networks are not caused by divorce and so there is a tendency for them to fall outside the scope of studies of family change or 'breakdown'. Yet the changing arrangements that children may experience in these families may be just as significant as divorce is to children living in nuclear families.

Conclusion

The main conclusion to be drawn from this outline of the different family arrangements we found is that it becomes starkly obvious that there is no one single type of family that experiences change or divorce. Moreover, processes of divorce and

separation can themselves take different forms and then in turn they occur in the context of different family cultures. Thus socio-economic class, gender, religion, and ethnicity can combine to produce immensely different experiences for children whose families are going through change. Although it has become popular to acknowledge diversity in family forms and structures, we have not yet sufficiently carried this recognition through into debates on divorce and separation. Indeed, it is our argument that the very concentration on divorce (as if it were a readily identifiable single transition from one type of family to another) obscures our understanding of profoundly different experiences of family life and life course transitions. Although some of the children we interviewed fitted into the perceived dominant model of marriage, economic security and then the potentially traumatic experience of divorce, others manifestly did not. These latter experiences have tended to be excluded from debates on studies of divorce and pushed into discussions about such things as family violence or family poverty, as if these were separate issues.[2] This compartmentalisation of children's family lives has robbed debates on divorce of a proper appreciation of the complexities of families. What is more problematic has been the tendency to assume that it is divorce itself which gives rise to the problems that are publicly revealed after divorce or separation, but which may in fact have been a staple part of family life beforehand. It is therefore important to expand the concept of divorce into the wider notion of family transition so that we are more open to children's own definitions of families and what matters to them when families change, ebb and flow. Only then can we begin to see a much more complex picture which is better fitted to understanding the lived reality of diverse families.

Another of the most important consequences arising from defining families from the perspective of the children is that one moves away from ideas of 'broken' families, 'dysfunctional' families, or 'one-parent' families towards an understanding based much more upon the qualities of relationships and the significance of co-residence and care. The typology derived from our interviews with children outlined above does not (or at least tries not to) carry implicit value judgements. Terms like 'broken' always impart a particular meaning that is negative. By comparison terms like 'aggregated', 'demonstrative', 'meshed' and 'diasporic' should not instantly imply failure or inadequacy. From the perspective of children an aggregated family could be caring and warm, or it could be alien and unsettling. In a diasporic family a divorce might be a good thing or a bad thing, or it might make little difference, as far as a child is concerned. Thus, for some children, divorce or separation were the least of their worries, while for others they felt like major traumas. How children reacted was related to the nature of their previous experiences as well as the quality of the relationships they had (or established) with significant adults.

What we hope to demonstrate is that divorce or separation occurs in the context of dynamic relationships which are already located in a cultural context. Family life is not a flat landscape marked only by marital dissolution or cohabitation breakdown. Unless we can bring back into our vision of families the contours and flux of real life as it is experienced, we risk formulating policies, programmes and laws that bear little relationship to everyday life.

3   Relationships that matter

Why is it that, after the initial upset and disruption, some children adapt with relative ease to a parental separation while others struggle? There is now evidence that most children rise to the challenge of family reordering but that there is a minority who remain troubled long after the break-up of their parents' relationship (Hetherington, 1989; Rodgers and Pryor, 1998; Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Smart *et al.*, 2001). The children in this study are no exception and there are stark divergences in their experiences. By their own reports, many of the children we interviewed were content with their circumstances. But 18 found some aspects of their family lives and relationships difficult and another eight described severe emotional pressures. Amongst these 26 children were eight whose parents had been separated for less than a year. Putting their accounts aside in view of the relatively short time which they had had to adjust, what emerges as being at the heart of much of the disquiet which children voiced is uncertainty about *parental commitment*. The children's accounts of their day-to-day family activities and practices conveyed, with varying degrees of directness, a great deal about their perceptions of the quality of their relationships and the extent to which they believed themselves to matter to their parents. Three broad groups can be distinguished within the sample as a whole:

- Children who, irrespective of their parents' separation, benefited from close supportive links with both parents and who were confident that they were important to each of them. These children invariably described themselves as happy.

- Children who felt that the commitment of one parent (usually their non-resident parent) had diminished with the separation despite there being ongoing contact. These children often expressed distress as they were coming to believe that they no longer mattered to this parent as they once had done.

- Children who were unsure if they had ever mattered to one or both parents. Where they knew themselves to be loved by one committed parent, or had formed close ties with 'new' parents, these children sometimes expressed little interest in an absent parent with whom they had had no real involvement. A number, however, were made deeply unhappy by this perceived lack of parental commitment and care.

In what follows we have constructed three groups of case studies that typify these positive and negative experiences. We then go on to consider the implications of promoting contact between children and their parents when parental commitment is uncertain.

Committed relationships with both parents

Many of the children we spoke to were embedded within a network of close family relationships which worked for them and which included both of their birth parents. One or both parents might have repartnered but the distinctive feature of these children's accounts was that they knew with certainty that they were loved by, and important to, them both. It was not simply that each of their parents was involved in the children's lives but that they both actively communicated their commitment and care. These family arrangements can be said to exemplify the ethos of joint parenting promoted by the Children Act 1989, an objective of which was to shift the mind-set of divorcing parents away from the concept of 'winning' or 'losing' their children towards an acknowledgement of the shared nature of the enterprise of post-divorce parenting (Hoggett, 1994; Smart and Neale, 1999).

Case studies

Richard

Nine-year-old Richard has lived with his mother and seven-year-old sister Amy since his parents separated two years ago. The children have routinely visited their father on alternate weekends throughout this time. Richard would prefer his parents to be together but is no longer unduly troubled by their separation:

> Q: *How do you think things have worked out for you? If you gave it a mark out of ten, what would you give it now?*
>
> Richard: *Seven.*

But, as he explained, it had taken him some time to adjust:

> It took me a year-and-a-half to get over it. 'Cos I missed my dad.

Richard's main concern, when his parents separated, was that he would lose touch with his father as he moved to live in the South East. In fact, his father kept in close contact and never failed to collect Richard and Amy for their weekend visits. However, the long car journeys were tiring and Richard was conscious that his father was far away. The turning point came when his father decided to return to the North. In practical terms this has meant that Richard sees more of him. Whereas before he had to email his father with news of his progress in the school football team, his dad now comes to watch his matches. The more fundamental point, however, is that Richard has been reassured about his father's commitment. His decision to live nearer to the children and his active support of Richard's interests are, for Richard, conclusive evidence of this.

Adam

Neither of Richard's parents has repartnered although he expects that they may do in the future. He sometimes talks about this with his classmate,

Adam, as Richard is keen to know what it is like to have a 'new' family. Both of Adam's parents have remarried. In addition to his 'new' parents, Adam has a stepbrother of his own age (through his father's new relationship) and a younger half-sister (through his mother's). His main home is with his mother but he stays overnight with his father at least twice a week. Adam spoke of all the members of his divorce-extended family with warmth and affection. The extent to which both sets of parents work together to support the children was shown by numerous comments in Adam's interview. He told us, for example, that his stepbrother Andrew, who has become his close friend and ally, regularly stays with him at his mother's house. Andrew has no genetic ties with any member of Adam's mother's household but is treated as a family member. This matters to Adam as he wants Andrew to be seen as his brother by both of his parents (and his step-parents), and for the sharing of a home by the two boys to be a reciprocal arrangement. The willingness of both of his families to acknowledge how important this is to him tangibly demonstrates their commitment to him.

Diminished commitment

Many of the children who were struggling to manage the changes brought about by their parents' separation were troubled, above all else, by alterations in their relationship with their non-resident parent (usually their father). A characteristic scenario has some similarities with that of children whose families transcend separation in that the children remained in contact with their father. But, despite these contact arrangements, they were beginning to question the strength of their father's commitment. Often this was because they saw him developing a new life in which they themselves played little part, and they felt that his attention was inexorably shifting away to new interests and new family ties. However,

repartnering was not always responsible for these changes. A parent's insensitivity to children's interests or feelings about contact arrangements could also leave them feeling that they no longer mattered as they once had done.

Case study

JJ

Ten-year-old JJ's parents have been separated for three years. He lives with his mother and younger brother, and has regular weekly contact with his father. Yet, despite the reliability of these arrangements, JJ has become increasingly unhappy and, by his own report, was experiencing emotional and behavioural problems at home and at school. He said:

> *It's been three years and still new problems keep happening and I just have to keep coping and coping and coping until I can't. And it's getting to 'I can't' now.*

JJ's father had repartnered, introducing a new parent and a new stepbrother into his life, and his stepmother had recently become pregnant. He found this sequence of changes difficult in itself but his main problem was the quality of his relationship with his father. In response to a question about the important people in his life he referred to his mother and brother then commented, 'My dad is but I don't really...' Later, we picked this remark up and he told us:

> *It's going to start to go worser than it is now, even though I don't like it and I'm nearly in tears. Because there's a new baby coming and think of it – pram, baby chair, 'why is it crying?'. It's going to be much harder now ... it feels a lot more* [sigh] *how do I say it? Er, lot more per cent that I won't see him a lot.*

Despite regularly spending time with his father, JJ was concerned about losing him. He was open about his anxiety about how the arrival of the new baby would affect his relationship with his father,

but his upset was compounded by his father's apparent lack of regard for JJ's own social life and interests:

> JJ: *I see him every Wednesday and Sunday ... but the trouble is I don't really like it, yes I do like my dad it's just I don't like going on Wednesdays. 'Cos on Wednesdays I go to the Base* [youth club] *and it stops me from going to the Base if I'm going to my dad's.*
>
> Q: *So that makes it hard for you, does it?*
>
> JJ: *Not really hard but makes me quite sad. When I go there I'm in tears ... My mum's all right taking me but my dad, I asked my dad, he's too tired. Grandma and Grandpa's got friends round. That's it ... And he's going to have a lot more excuses 'cos 'I've got to look after the baby, Tammy* [new partner] *can't cope'.*

From JJ's perspective, seeing his father was not the crucial issue; what he wanted was to know that he mattered to him. His father's inability to communicate his commitment to JJ in practical ways, such as supporting his social activities and hobbies, meant that spending time with his father could heighten rather than diminish his sense of unimportance. JJ mistrusted his father's explanations and saw them as excuses. He compared his present life negatively with the past, and was left wishing that the separation had never occurred:

> *Every time I go to bed I think this is all a dream ... One day I'll wake up and say 'Hi mum', and dad will be there and I'll say 'Dad, what are you doing here?' I know it's not true. I think to myself, 'What are you talking about JJ?' but I wish ... and just think in my mind, 'I hope it's true'.*

Absent parents

A third group of children had little or no contact with one birth parent or, less usually, with either. For some of these children their absent parent had little relevance to their lives. Particularly where they knew themselves to be loved and cared for by their resident parent, or where they had formed close ties with 'social' parents, they gave little thought to a parent they barely knew. These children mostly spoke of themselves as being happy with the relationships which they had, and knew they could rely on. There were others, however, who were less sanguine and whose absent parents took up more mental space. Many of these latter children had parents whose own relationship was short-lived and often violent, and the children, too, had sometimes been abused. Rejection was a common feature in their accounts and contact, where it had been attempted, was in some cases resisted by the child, and in others had raised the child's expectations only to disappoint them.

Case studies

Christie

Six-year-old Christie appeared to have few supportive relationships. Her grandparents were dead and her family had become defined for her as comprising only her mother and herself. When we spoke to her, her mother was pregnant but was not planning for the baby's father to be a part of their lives. Christie was looking forward to having a new brother or sister and saw nothing out of the ordinary in their circumstances. She had come to the conclusion that families work best without fathers:

> I've always wanted [just] *my mum 'cos my dad, he never did anything for me ... Well, me dad never liked my mum in the first place ... He just didn't want her because her hair was all fuzzy and stuff* [although] *he liked her when they were at the pub ... He used to*

get in the bedroom, lock me out of the bedroom and never care and just hit my mum. No matter how much I was screaming ... Because when he walks in, he expects that meals are on the table for him and he just starts getting angry and loses his temper. He just wants everything his way ... I [don't] *ever want to see him again and never because of what he's done to my mum and me.*

Christie had no contact with her father. He had applied for a contact order but his application was refused; Christie had no regrets. When her mother subsequently found a new partner Christie imagined she would now have a 'real' father, but was quickly disillusioned:

> *He just didn't want to do anything. I couldn't even watch programmes after school, it was just horse racing or wrestling ... I just didn't think it was that good. To have a dad like that. Or any dad.*

So, at the age of six, Christie had never experienced what it was like to have a committed father. Nor had she seen any evidence of commitment from her father (or from subsequent cohabitants) to her mother. She 'knew' that not all men behaved in this way, and wondered why her mother's relationships took the course they did. Reflecting that her mother's boyfriends were always 'nasty', she remarked 'I don't know why people are always nasty to my mum?' Yet, if Christie was saddened by these experiences, she was nevertheless positive in her outlook. Rather than feeling that she herself was rejected by her father she chose to reject him, constructing his lack of involvement in her life as a benefit rather than a loss. Also, she was confident in her relationship with her mother, and knew that she mattered to her. She therefore remained hopeful:

> *Me and my mum's going to get over it soon. Time ... We don't think about it that much, we think about the baby. How it's going to be and when it's grown up and stuff.*

Joely

Joely (aged nine) was remarkably resilient in her outlook. For many years she had believed her father to be Thomas, her mother's cohabitee. It was only when she was six that she learnt that this was not so:

Q: *How did you find out that Mark is your real dad?*

Joely (9): *I couldn't get to sleep so I went down with mum and she was watching* Emmerdale, *she let me stay down, then I think summat just slipped out of my mum's head and she said, 'Come here, Joely' and she told me, and it was really, really upsetting. But then I ignored my dad* [Thomas] *for ... about eight weeks ... because I thought when I was little, that he took Mark off my mum.*

Q: *So, tell me how you started to see Mark?*

Joely: *Cos I was carrying on, just to see him, what he was like. He sent some photos and a letter saying, my mum was a little bit upset, 'cos he sent a letter saying 'Come and live with me now'. And he says 'We can go on holiday together' ... But I didn't want to go and live with him anyway ... Just* [wanted] *to find out who he was and how he looked.*

Having discovered the existence of her 'real' father Joely, unsurprisingly, wanted to get to know him. It seems that there was an attempt by everyone concerned to support her in this (despite concerns about Mark's background) for contact was established and she eventually went to stay with her father and his new family for a short time. However, the relationship she hoped for never developed. Extravagant promises made to her by her father came to nothing, and Joely gradually discovered that this would be the pattern of their relationship:

I don't care about him any more because everything he's promised, he lets me down all the time.

What finally turned Joely against her father was discovering his propensity to violence. This frightened Joely, and the more she learnt of him the more certain she became that she did not like him or wish to continue seeing him. She was helped in reaching her decision by the comparison she was able to draw between Mark and her social father, Thomas. She told us:

I got into like, he was my dad. But I think he's not because really my dad's Thomas, he's the one that brought me up and I like it that way.

Joely was fortunate in that when she became disillusioned with Mark as a father she still had Thomas who had been reliable and dependable throughout. From her perspective, the lack of a genetic link with Thomas is unimportant; he and her mother and her siblings are what constitutes her family because they are the ones involved in the day-to-day family activities which build ties of commitment and care. It is arguable, however, that it helped Joely to meet Mark and form her own opinion of him. The fantasy which she was tempted to construct in her mind lost whatever influence it might have had once it was exposed to the reality of Mark himself.

Matthew

Ten-year-old Matthew was being brought up by his maternal grandparents. He had no contact with his mother and made no mention of his father. He said:

[My mum]*'s left home. She sent me to court for my grandma to get me 'cos she didn't want me. She wanted to go out partying and drinking and that. She left everything that my grandma and grandad got for her and left.*

Matthew was eight months old when his mother gave him up. He remained deeply preoccupied by this event, despite having close relationships with his grandparents; as he put it, 'I

still have it in my mind, like'. He had been given an explanation of why he lived with his grandparents and not his mother ('She wanted to go out partying and drinking') but this did not satisfy him. The question which he wanted to have answered was the more fundamental one, 'Why didn't she want me?' This was all the more pointed for him as he was aware that his mother now had other children whom she was raising herself. Eventually, in response to his repeated questions, his grandmother arranged for him to meet his mother so that he could talk to her directly. But the meeting was not a success:

> When I seen [my mum], *I just wanted to see her by herself but she brought somebody with her. And I thought, 'This is a complete stranger to me'. And I says, I exactly said to her 'I want you by yourself', and she just ignored me. And I never got any answers out of my mum ... She just sat there doing nowt while* Tina [her friend] *just kept talking. Like when I said to her, 'Why did you leave me?', Tina talked. Sara was just going like this* [bored expression].

Although much about his relationship to his mother was shrouded in mystery for Matthew, the one thing he 'knew' with certainty was that his mother had not 'wanted' him. And what he read from his eventual meeting with her was confirmation of this; she 'ignored' his request to see her alone; she let her friend speak for her rather than answering his questions herself; she pulled a face, as if she were bored. Irrespective of whether Matthew's interpretation is correct, this is what he believes. Unsurprisingly, this sense of rejection is difficult for Matthew to live with. At school, and elsewhere, he is acutely sensitive to references to his mother; perceived taunts from other children (see Chapter 5) make it hard for him to control his feelings: 'I get so worked up, I sort of like, do owt', he said.

Commitment and contact

The prevailing stereotype of divorce constructs this as a source of harm to children because it undermines the security which young children are presumed to need, and which is widely regarded as being based in a loving and reliable relationship with both parents. As a means of minimising the risk posed by separation and divorce, family policy and legislation emphasise that ongoing contact with both parents is a 'right' to which children are entitled (Fortin, 1998). However, this policy assumes that all children have two parents who are equally there for them and this is demonstrably not the case. Although the majority of children in our sample had strong ties of affection and care with both birth parents, others were less fortunate. For these latter children, the value of contact was sometimes questionable. Spending time with a parent who – for whatever reason – is unable to communicate commitment beyond the simple fact of their presence can, as JJ's story shows, be painful. Similarly, efforts to promote or reinvigorate parent–child relationships which have never been established or which are already seriously compromised may only lead to children being required to see someone who cannot sustain the necessary commitment. Clearly, decisions about contact are complex. The risks and benefits involved can only be assessed individually for, as the accounts of Joely and Matthew suggest, information about a biological parent is often bound up with children's sense of identity. Nonetheless, in some cases, children may find it easier to live without a parent (even if temporarily) than to repeatedly face the failure of their hopes and legitimate expectations. At the same time, there needs to be a wider recognition of the fact that the absence of a genetic parent from children's lives does not invariably spell harm. As some of the children we spoke to made clear, it is the quality of their relationships that matters, not biological

connection per se. Children can feel confident in themselves and their family relationships whether they have two committed parents or one; equally, the care shown by social parents can be no less valuable than that of genetic kin. We would therefore argue that, while the promotion of contact has undoubtedly done much to ensure that children's family relationships transcend divorce, this policy needs to be balanced by support for the relationships which children have and which work for them, whether based in blood or in social ties.

Moving now from the divergences between children to the commonalities which they share, we found remarkable similarities in children's attitudes towards the kinds of help which they value. This is the subject of the chapters which follow.

4 Emotional coping

We begin our examination of the resources available to children to help them manage changes in their family lives by considering children as *people capable of dealing themselves* with everyday problems. We therefore focus in this chapter on the strategies which children described as helping them to cope emotionally with the upset associated with a parental separation, drawing on both group and individual interviews. All quotations are from individual interviews unless otherwise stated.

Can children manage their own feelings?

The idea that young children actively manage their feelings is one that arouses surprise among many adults (Waksler, 1991). For all that concepts of childhood are changing, age remains closely bound up with notions of competence (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis, 1998). Young children, especially, are often thought to have, at best, limited capabilities. This is particularly so in terms of understanding the thoughts and behaviour of others, or coping with personal dilemmas or difficulties without adult support. Added to this, their physical smallness, dependency and perceived social 'innocence' trigger powerful desires to shield them from the harsher realities of life. All of this has generated a climate in which, traditionally, parents have been encouraged to protect their children from learning of any problems they (the parents) are facing (Reynolds, 2001), in the comforting belief that, unless explicitly confronted with what is happening, the children will not 'notice'. This view is engagingly captured in a (1994) article by Hoggett on the private law provisions of the Children Act 1989, where she notes:

> [Children] *can be sublimely indifferent to their parents' unhappiness as long as it does not concern them directly. They suffer when their parents' conflicts put their own little worlds at risk, but less so if their parents can hide the conflict from them.*
> (Hoggett, 1994, p. 9)

Yet, as Anne Fine, the children's laureate, has remarked, children are 'half-sized, not half-brained',[1] and take a keen interest in the social world from an early age. Stories, from traditional fairy tales to Harry Potter, offer them an imaginative means of making sense of the complexities of social relationships and engaging with worrying or frightening aspects of everyday life (Bettelheim, 1975; Rustin and Rustin, 2001). Even more importantly, family life provides them with abundant opportunities to gain an entry into social understanding. Tizard and Hughes (1984), and Dunn (1996), have provided vivid accounts of the persistence with which children as young as three or four pursue answers to the questions that puzzle or intrigue them. They show children's fascination with understanding how the world works and why people behave as they do. Other clinical and developmental psychologists (Rothbaum *et al.,* 1982*;* Band and Weisz, 1988; Thurber and Weisz, 1997) have identified children's responses to day-to-day problems, classifying these as involving:

- *changing the world* (trying to alter their external circumstances)

- *changing themselves* (trying to change their internal states) or

- *giving up* (doing nothing).

We therefore began with the assumption that the children we interviewed would have made efforts to understand why their parents had separated and would also be able to describe how they (or a fictional child) could help themselves during times of upset linked to family change. In particular, we wanted to know the children's views on the coping strategies that work best, and how these help. Before moving on to outline our findings, two points of particular interest emerged from the individual interviews which are worth noting:

- Despite the differences in the children's lifestyles and experiences, there were many similarities in their attitudes towards coping and support, with more differences emerging between boys and girls, and older and younger children, than between children from dissimilar social circumstances.

- There were no children who said there was nothing that could be done if they were upset by changes taking place in their families, despite their restricted scope to influence or alter their parents' decisions.

Coping strategies

The coping strategies that the children identified were overwhelmingly concerned with emotional coping ('changing themselves'). In their focus groups they enjoyed fantasising about taking direct action to reunite parents intent on a separation, or to sabotage parents' new relationships. But they invariably acknowledged that in reality there was usually little they could do to influence parents' personal lives or decisions; in other words, their scope for strategies based on 'changing the world' was highly restricted. So, in practice, they concentrated on altering their own states of mind (if they were unhappy), as this gave them some prospect of making a real difference. Their preferred means of coping fell into two broad groups, which we have called:

- *diversion*
- *emotional expression*.

As will become apparent in the chapters that follow, the children's preference for diversionary and emotionally expressive strategies was not restricted to their individual coping efforts but was also a feature of their attitudes towards help generally. Below, however, we restrict ourselves to the part they played in children's management of their emotional responses to family change.

Diversion

Family transitions are not events but processes, and take time. This means that children's coping efforts often have to be extended ones. It is this necessity to live with upset and uncertainty over a considerable period of time that can make the process of coping so difficult and demanding. When coupled with children's inability to alter their external circumstances in any significant way, it is undoubtedly also this feature of family transitions that makes diversion so appealing, because the hardest thing, children said, was to retain a sense of normality:

Q:	*What is the hardest thing for children if mums and dads split up?*
Rekha (9):	*To keep their life going.*
Elise (10):	*There's nothing children can do* [if parents split up]. *It's because it's their parents. There's no point getting involved because it might make it worse.*
Q:	*So what's the best thing to do?*
Elise:	*Try and forget what's happened and get on with normal life.*

It is not that children were oblivious to what was taking place, or wanted to pretend that nothing was happening. As numerous studies have now shown, children are keen to be treated as full members of their families (Smart *et al.,* 2001); to have information about changes that will affect them, and opportunities to participate in the plans that their parents are making for them (Walzac and Burns, 1984; Mitchell, 1985; Cockett and Tripp, 1994; Fincham *et al.,* 2001). The children in the present study were no exception to this. But they indicated that, when their family life was disrupted and uncertain, they also needed opportunities to rid themselves temporarily of their anxieties. It was at these times that diversion offered an escape route and a means of buffering themselves against the upsetting events around them. The primary

goal of this set of behaviours was, as the children expressed it, to *forget*.

One means of achieving this was through avoidance. The drawing shown below in Figure 2 is a semi-humorous reference to this by a ten-year-old, Ben.

In his picture, Ben shows two brothers absorbed in watching a football match on the television while their parents argue in the same room. During a focus group discussion, when writing a collaborative story about parental separation, he had commented that boys and girls react differently to this type of event:

Ben (10): [The boys] *don't care about it. Tara* [their sister] *cares about it and she gets upset but the boys don't. If they are watching the TV at night and* [their parents] *start arguing they just sit there ... and ignore it.*

Q: *So Tara will try to understand what is happening but Colin and James will try to ignore it, will they?*

Ben: *Yeah. Because there are better things to watch on TV.*
(Extracted from group interview)

In the context of a mixed-sex group the children had enjoyed debating whether girls are more 'sensitive' than boys. With his drawing, Ben was enjoying a chance to provoke the girls with his assertion of a particular male stereotype. Nevertheless, in individual interviews, some boys were open about their efforts to block out upsetting events:

JJ (10): *When they* [parents] *started fighting, I just turned my back. Just went to my room.*

Girls preferred to think that, faced with arguing parents, they would try to act as peacemakers. They too, however, often spoke of times when they had wanted to forget what was happening between their parents, and described numbers of ways in which they tried to put distressing thoughts from their minds. Taking refuge in their bedroom was especially popular as this was somewhere they could find privacy, and have recourse to imaginative distractions, such as immersing themselves in a book or a private game.

Physical comfort was another important recourse, particularly for the younger children, who found this a helpful way of reducing bodily

Figure 2 Ben's picture
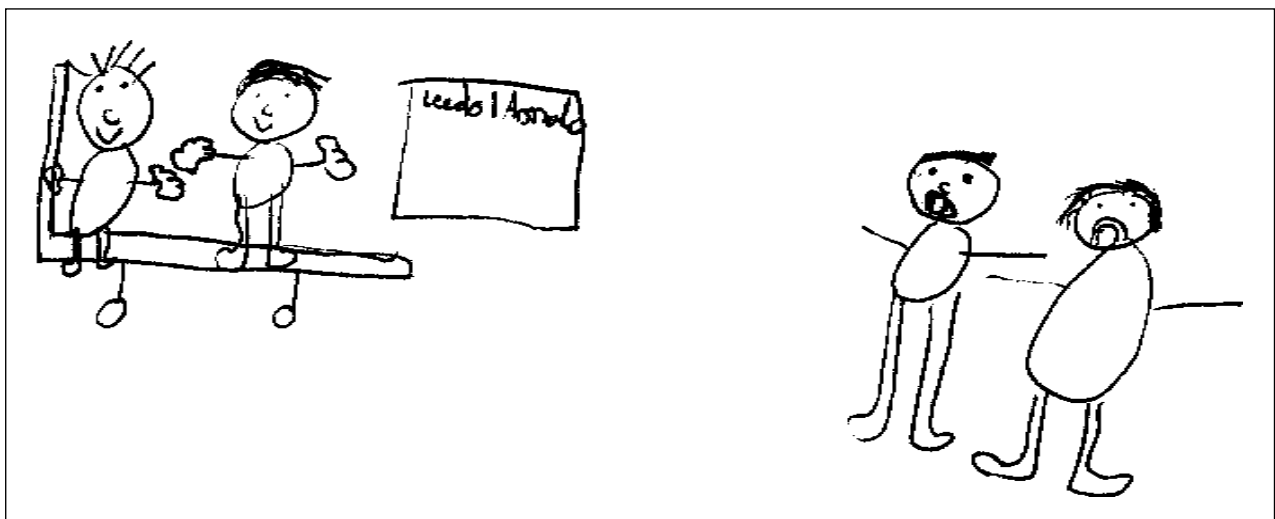
and mental tension when they were trying to cope with difficult feelings. Cuddling a soft toy in bed was popular with both boys and girls, and could also help an anxious child to feel braver. William (six years old), whose father had been violent towards both him and his mother, said, 'When you go in my bedroom there are teddies guarding all around my bedroom'. Pets, too, constituted a comforting source of emotional support (McNicholas and Collis, 2001). Several children spoke of feeling happier when they stroked or cuddled a pet, or said their pet would lick them 'better', offer them a sympathetic ear, or cheer them up by joining in a game.

Comfort eating was sometimes referred to, although differences in family practices meant that some children risked punishment if they helped themselves to food. However, one six-year-old boy explained that, 'I have asthma every night. Milk makes me feel better.' Similarly, Miriam (10) described how:

> I used to stuff myself with chocolate ... to forget about it [parents' arguments] and watch TV till about three o'clock in the morning.

Although most of the children relied on some form of activity to distract themselves and induce a shift in their state of mind, a number employed purely cognitive strategies and articulated the merits of 'positive thinking':

Max (10): *Just think about next week when it's over. And the future, what's going to happen. Just leave the past behind 'cos it's happened and you can still see your dad. I did that, I didn't think about the past.*

Lucy (8): *When I get upset I just think of something nice and then I get happier, then I cuddle my teddy, then I go to sleep.*

However, perhaps the most frequently mentioned option was sleep:

Q: *What would Jay* [vignette character] *do if he's feeling upset?*

Sam Brown (9): *I think Jay would probably go to sleep. It normally helps me to forget.*

Lizzie (10): *Jay just goes and lays on his bed and sleeps until morning. 'Cos I feel better when I wake up, forget about it.*

At first glance, these references to sleep are dispiriting, as they seem to imply feelings of negativity and powerlessness. A closer reading, however, suggests that such remarks are less about giving up in the face of a situation not of their own choosing than bringing about an alteration in their state of mind. The children invariably spoke of 'feeling better' when they woke up, and indicated that in most cases it was to achieve this mood shift that they sought sleep rather than from a sense of hopelessness.

Emotional expression

A second set of strategies for emotional coping that children described themselves as using focused on altering their mood by expressing (and so releasing) feelings of upset rather than by trying to take their mind off whatever was making them unhappy. Crying is an obvious and acceptable way of releasing feelings of distress, and is a response that we expect from children faced with a parental separation. Interestingly, however, children themselves were open that they would often cry as much to attract attention and elicit help, as to obtain emotional relief.

Far less acceptable, to many adults, are displays of anger from children. Nonetheless, this was an emotion that many children described as being one part of their response to a decision by their parents to separate. Younger children, especially, talked of

finding emotional relief in angry or destructive outbursts. Asked what a fictional child might do if a father failed to turn up for a contact visit, the responses included:

Kelly Marie (6): *Smack him.*

Adam (9): *He* [child] *might be ... flipping things around and getting bored.*

Sarah (7): *Kick in the door.*

Patrick (6): [He] *gets angry. Messes his bedroom up.*

Miriam (10): *He might get a bit angry and annoyed ... scream and shout and break things.*

It is important for us to recognise that such behaviour is an expression of distress and to help children find ways of channelling such powerful emotions. One child who had received such help was six-year-old Spike, who said:

Spike (6): *If you keep your feelings inside it will make you poorly. When you've got some badness it all gets inside you, then you have a tummy ache or something.*

Q: *So what can Jay do?*

Spike: *Well, he'll like, play with his toys and cry. Or take deep breaths* [demonstrates]. *Some children sort of shout and get angry by having a fight with their toys, with punching a cushion ... because if you feel angry and kick your mum and stuff, that doesn't help. Because it goes back inside you.*

Q: *What if you kick your toys and not your mum?*

Spike: *That doesn't matter 'cos they don't have feelings.*

Spike was clearly a resourceful child who enjoyed putting into practice some of the strategies he had been taught by a counsellor. But it was not beyond children's abilities to discover their own 'safe' methods for expressing strong feelings. A popular method amongst some of the older girls was to express their feelings in a diary or drawing:

Kara (9): *I've got a secret diary where I put all my, you know like you're talking to me about, I'm talking to you about my family, I've been putting things in there, in my diary.*

Joely (9): *I just scribble on some paper, or stamp on some paper and screw it up when I'm really, really angry ... It gets all the feeling away. I've got ... this table ... and that's where I can draw, 'cos I've got my own room and I've got my key to my room. It's in my bag, no one can go in my bedroom.*

Active or unaware?

What is so striking about many of the children's comments is their self-awareness and resourcefulness. The five and six year olds may have employed a restricted vocabulary when describing their own or fictional children's feelings (usually relying on 'sad' or 'happy'), but even the youngest children could relate practical steps that they or another child might take to make themselves feel better when upset. Of course, saying what 'might' be done is not the same as actually doing this. Nevertheless, the readiness with which they came up with a range of possibilities shows the extent to which children actively engage with personal dilemmas rather than passively endure them.

The strategies that the children described are, however, open to misinterpretation. We have argued that diversion and avoidance are coping strategies that children knowingly employ. But it is easy for activities such as these to be mistaken as signs that children are 'unaware' of what is happening around them – particularly when this

offers the comforting illusion that it is kinder to say nothing to children than to upset them by keeping them informed.

5 Managing with the help of friends

In the last chapter, we showed how many primary-school-aged children, faced with a parental separation, adopt a policy of 'trying to get on with it'. Knowing that they can do little to alter their circumstances they try to make the best of things and focus their efforts on managing any unhappiness they feel. As some of the children indicated (see Rekha and Elise, Chapter 4), it becomes important to them to maintain some sense of 'normal life' at such times, and it is here that siblings and friends often play a vital role. In this chapter we look at the help that children give to each other and, in particular, what it is that makes some children a good source of support (and others not), and the kinds of help that children appreciate from their peers. First, however, we briefly backtrack to consider why children might look for help from friends in the first place.

Help from parents

The concept of childhood dependency, and the privileged status of the parent–child relationship, give rise to expectations that it should be parents who concern themselves with their children's well-being and support them during times of trouble. And, undoubtedly, most parents do exactly this, most of the time. But there are risks in assuming that children's needs will always or primarily be met by their parents, not least that:

- this isolates both parents and children; and

- means we fail to recognise that children's lives are not straightforwardly subsumed within those of their parents, or

- that, as separate persons, children may want to exercise some choice about where they look for help.

In the context of separation, divorce or repartnering, however, the question of parental support raises some especially tricky issues, in that:

- many children are inhibited about approaching their parents with their anxieties at such times, fearing to upset them (Gorell Barnes *et al.*, 1998; Dowling and Gorell Barnes, 2000)

- parents are often preoccupied with the changes going on in their own lives and as a result can be less emotionally available to their children (Cockett and Tripp, 1994; Harald, 2001).

In these circumstances it is unsurprising that a recent study has reported that only 5 per cent of children with separated parents had felt encouraged to talk to them about what was happening (Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001). Nevertheless, this leaves open the question of where children can turn for help if not to their parents.

One answer is other family members, and Dunn and Deater-Deckard (2001) discuss the importance of grandparents to children living through family transitions. Another is friends. The supportive nature of adolescent friendships is now well established (Boldero and Fallon, 1995; Fawcett, 1997; Childline, 1998; Hallett *et al.*, 2000), and there is a growing interest in the benefits of peer support schemes for this age group (Cowie and Sharp, 1996; Sharp and Cowie, 1998). However, despite the inclusion of a number of younger children in the research samples of some recent studies (see Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001; Fincham *et al.*, 2001), relatively little is known of the role that friendship plays for primary school children facing family transitions. Common sense suggests that there may be differences in their attitudes and those of older children. Indeed, in a more generalised context, Berndt (1988) has reported that younger children are less likely than older ones to disclose their thoughts and feelings to their friends, although in other respects their friendships may be just as supportive. This raises some interesting questions

such as whether confiding involves social skills or a level of reflexiveness which young children have not fully acquired, or whether they *prefer* other forms of support. Whichever way such questions are answered, Berndt's findings highlight the importance of suspending any assumptions about what constitutes support between young friends.

Help from friends

In general, our findings show that friendship does indeed play an important role for children, but they are discriminating in the kinds of help that they look for, and the friends they will accept help from. Once again, we found that the children's comments clustered around the same two coping strategies that we discussed in Chapter 4, namely diversion and emotional expression, although here they took a slightly different form. In this context *diversion* is a matter of:

- being cheered up, and
- forgetting.

While *emotional expression* is principally about:

- certain forms of play, and
- confiding.

Diversion was much the most popular form of peer support and it was on the issue of confiding that there was most variation in the children's responses. In part this was a matter of gender with fewer boys than girls saying they would talk to a friend, but the children's doubts primarily centred on issues of privacy, trust and the emotional costs of confiding. We concentrate in this chapter on confiding as this was the topic that divided children most.

Choosing a friend to confide in

Confiding personal feelings is widely assumed to be one of the most helpful ways of dealing with personal problems, and this is reflected in the

advice leaflets written for separating parents, one of which says, '[t]he children who usually cope best are those who have a chance to talk to someone about how they are feeling' (Lord Chancellor's Department, 2001). However, the children we spoke to were clear that confiding is not a universal panacea. When it came to friends, children who did confide were highly discriminating in who they chose to open up to. A confidante had to be somebody with the right personal qualities:

Q: *If you were thinking about somebody to talk to at school, who would you talk to?*

Buffy (11): *I don't know really because I'm not too friendly with Chantal* [whose parents have split up] *and James* [ditto] *isn't a person that I want to talk to.* He's a friend but he's not a person that I would talk to. *So there's no one really out of those two and so I would go to my friends.*

Q: *What makes James not that sort of person?*

Buffy: *I don't know, because he's like a chatty person, he doesn't really like to talk about things like that.*
(Our emphasis)

Other children said their peers were sometimes too curious and too lacking in sensitivity to be good confidants. By speaking to friends, they could leave themselves open to inquisitive questioning, which would simply inflame rather than relieve whatever unhappiness they were feeling. In these circumstances, confiding came with an emotional cost:

Lauren (10): *Sometimes friends make it even worse. They keep talking about it and they don't stop and keep asking questions about it.*

Sophie (6): *I like to keep about the divorce private. I sort of don't mind talking to adults. But they* [other children] *ask me 'What's a divorce?' and go on and on and I really hate it.*

Q: *So you wouldn't tell a friend what was happening?*

Sarah (7): *No, it's just too upsetting.*

Talking to a school friend

Children were particularly concerned about talking to school friends. Overwhelmingly, they preferred to keep their family lives private when they were in school and their greatest anxiety was that personal information would become public knowledge. This meant that any confidants who were also school friends had to be chosen with care. The children needed to know that their friends would respect the privacy of any personal information which they shared with them. 'Best' friends could usually be trusted but some school friends could not:

Lucy (8): *Sometimes I want to tell some of my friends my mum and dad have split up, my friends that I trust and that don't tell anybody ... if everybody knew it wouldn't be nice. You know, say if they went and told somebody else and then that person went and told somebody else and then everybody knew, it wouldn't be a secret any more.*

Kara (9): *You don't want to go telling 'em* [classmates] *your business 'cos they might be telling other people ... I don't think I trust Ellie May 'cos when I came to school one day people were coming over to me and saying, 'Where's your dad gone? Where's your dad gone?', and I always thought that was Ellie May.*

Helen (9): [I wouldn't tell school friends because] *they might tell people you don't want to know and then it might spread and then people will be nasty to you and tease you and call you names and say your mum and dad are horrible.*

Taunting

The children had good reason to be circumspect for, as Helen indicates, verbal taunts are an everyday part of social interaction between children at school. Information about family backgrounds provides a particularly fertile source for the insults traded in the playground. Many children see disparaging remarks about their family as a more painful form of abuse than physical assaults (Cawson *et al.*, 2001). A number of the children we interviewed had experienced this form of ill-usage by their peers and it could lead to considerable problems, as the following extracts show:

Kimberley (9): *My dad's 46 and I'm only nine and they* [classmates] *go, 'Well my dad isn't old like yours', and they all walk round the classroom going* [croaking noise] *... And everyone's saying that my dad shoplifts and 'crafts', that's shoplifting, and on drugs and everything and it's just not nice ... I was talking* [about it] *to Francine in privacy and I says, 'Please don't let it out because I don't want telling all the school what I'm about', and what does she do next day? She just blurted it all out and everyone started to laugh at me. It weren't nice at all so I had to say, 'I told you not to let it out, didn't I Francine?' and then she started to push me and I says, 'Don't push me Francine, I don't want to get into a fight', and then she slapped me across face and my dad says, 'If*

*anyone hits you, you hit 'em back',
so I remembered that and I punched
her, so she doesn't touch me ever
again.*

Q: *Does anyone at school know that you
don't live with your mum?*

Matthew (10): *I don't know, I ain't asked them.
Brent Sadler and Jason Orchard, well
my mum actually lives next door to
them. 'Cos I asked them, 'Has my
mum sent you to annoy me or
summat?' and they said 'Yeah'. 'Cos
she usually asks them* [to do] *jobs
and that. She asks them, 'Will you do
a favour for me?'*

Q: *How do they annoy you Matthew?*

Matthew: *Sort of like say, 'Where is your
mum?' and that and I say, 'Oh, I don't
know', and they says to me 'Well, I
know', and I says to them, 'Well,
where?' and they say 'Well, what's
the point telling you if you haven't got
a mum?'*

Q: *What do you do when people say
things like that?*

Matthew: *I get, I just sort of like say, 'Well, it's
none of your business anyway.'*

Q: *So have you learnt not to let it upset
you?*

Matthew: *No. It still gets at me.*

Q: *Does it? But you try not to show it?*

Matthew: *No. 'Cos if I do it makes them do it
even more. 'Cos what happens, I get
so worked up I sort of like do owt. Do
owt. If they are annoying me so much
I just punch them. 'Cos it gets at me.*

Both of these children responded with physical retaliation to the taunts they were subjected to. One of the difficulties, of course, is that when children are provoked into counter-attacks in this way it can result in disciplinary measures by the school. In Kimberley's case, she had already been warned

that she would be moved to another class if she became involved in any further disruption. She was highly anxious about this prospect for, despite her volatile relationships with her classmates, she liked the school, which represented one of the few sources of continuity and reliability in her life:

*I don't tell my dad because I don't want to move
schools, it's a nice school. It's just the people in the
school ... That night* [after the warning from the
teacher] *I started to cry and my heart was awful.*

Talk which helps

If children were sometimes cruel to each other, they could also be kind. Among the younger children in the sample this often took the form of offering to play with a friend who seemed sad, or sharing toys or crisps. Talk, too, could constitute a form of emotional support, even amongst the Year 1 and Year 2 children. Asked how friends help their responses included:

Mark (6): *They listen to what you say.*

Josh (6): *They were thinking of ideas to help
me.*

Yvette (6): *By saying nice things and hugging
[you].*

Cherie (6): [They say] *'I'm sorry your dad hasn't
come for you.'*

As these comments reveal, talk was a way of offering sympathy, advice and comfort. Among the Year 4 and 5 children it was the girls who had most to say on this topic but boys, too, sometimes said it was helpful to talk:

Q: *Tell me what it was like talking to
your friends.*

Richard (9): *Well, I asked them what it* [splitting
up] *was like and stuff like that.*

Q: *Was that a help Richard?*

Richard: *It was, 'cos I knew that I wasn't the
only one.*

Nevertheless, confiding was only one of the roles of talk for the children. What many of them valued about talking to a friend was that this was a means by which they could *cheer themselves up* and *forget* their immediate worries. It was often the amusing and diversionary aspects of talk that appealed to them:

Miriam (10): *If he's a good friend he will listen and maybe give advice. Because mine do, my friends do. At the Youth Club we just sit in the toilets and talk about it and say, 'What can we do?', 'What do you do?' and just try to ignore it and stuff, and like forget about it ... My friend tells me things like, 'You should just try to get on with it and try to forget about it', and stuff ... We talk about food, Chinese and pizza and favourite toppings and all sorts of things. And that really helps you forget and then you play football and take it out of the ball. That's fun. I really like that.*

Buffy (11): *My best friend, she was really nice. I told her about it. She was really helpful. She just made me smile all the time, she tried to make me happy and think of other things. There's this programme on the telly called Buffy the Vampire Slayer and we used to always talk about that, what was going on on that and what we think's going to happen next, stuff like that.*

Michael (9): *He'd tell a friend after a few days when he got used to it.*

Q: *What makes friends good people to talk to?*

Michael: *They can help you out. They can make you feel better. They will cheer you up.*

Q: *Say Alex was a bit upset, what would you do to cheer him up?*

Michael: *Just say any jokes.*

What the children appreciated about their friends was their willingness to play or to talk about something funny or light-hearted. This made them feel better by cheering them up and helping them to forget their worries. Their comments are instructive. What is often forgotten, in the face of the counselling culture that pervades so much of the general advice on handling personal problems, is that it takes a lot of skill to be a good confidant. As Lauren, Sophie and Sarah point out (above), talking about personal difficulties can leave you feeling worse rather than better.

But, for those children who did want to talk, what made talking to a friend especially helpful was that they could *choose* the person they confided in, and their moment for confiding. Friends, too, were said to be alert to signs that enough had been said and recognised when to stop talking and suggest doing something fun instead.

Defusing tension with practical help

We conclude by looking at one child's account of a time when friends were helpful. During or after a separation children see their parents behaving in new ways. They might have to become used to them being with a new partner, or living alone when they might be unhappy or depressed. Joshua's mother was a single parent and began to drink when her husband left her:

Joshua (6): *Mum got drunk one night and she fell asleep on floor and she weed on carpet ... Paul* [older brother] *was playing on the computer and Paul, me and Ben, Paul's friend, we went downstairs and Ben said 'Emma, you went to the toilet on the carpet.' And then we found she'd been drinking a*

*lot of beer ... And then I said 'Mum!'
and she said 'Shut up', and then Ben
said 'Emma, I think you can't drink
any more because you'll feel sick.'
When he was saying it she kept
saying 'Shut up!' and then we put all
the, we hid the beer, we decided to
put the beer in the bin ... My mum
used to do it all the time ... I normally,
I just normally go to bed because
when she's normally drunk, when
she's finished being sick and
everything, then she normally just
makes some eggs on toast.*

Joshua was from a middle-class home. He and his family were not subject to social work or other forms of scrutiny (as were some of the children from disadvantaged homes), neither did he have any relatives living nearby. So he and his brother had to learn to deal with their mother's drinking by themselves. One of the things which is striking about his account is how matter of fact it is. The only time he hesitated was when he spoke of the times when he and his mother were on their own. Otherwise, he presents his 'story' as if he were relating an adventure in which he, his brother and their friend Ben had been involved. This particular narrative convention is one which a number of six year olds used when recounting how friends or siblings had helped them in difficult situations. It provides an interesting model, for the adventure story epitomises childhood agency, showing how, in the absence of authoritative adults, children act resourcefully to resolve a challenging situation. By reconstructing upsetting experiences in this way children can defuse them of their emotional tension while also boosting their own confidence. Of course, we cannot know how far they use this tactic in the face of a worrying situation as opposed to in its retelling. Nevertheless, reading between the lines, we can speculate that Ben's practical response was invaluable to Joshua at the time. Dealing with a problem practically not only makes it manageable, but also reduces its power as something out of the ordinary, making it less frightening or upsetting.

For many children it was especially as representatives of normality that their friends were important during family transitions. In a changing situation, friendships represented continuity. They provided a refuge to which children could escape when the going within their family became too rough and which, when much else was disrupted and unstable, was comfortingly familiar. This desire for restitution of the everyday is evident in Joshua's account where he describes how, if he goes to bed when his mother is drunk, there is the hope that when he next sees her she will be doing something as mundane (and safe) as scrambling herself some eggs.

6 The role of schools

Few children, as Chapter 5 showed, relish the prospect of family problems becoming known to their classmates. Nonetheless, there is a widespread belief that schools are well situated to help children who are upset by processes of family change. This rests on two sets of suppositions:

1   That teachers become familiar with their pupils through the day-to-day interaction that they have with them, and so are in a position to see any changes in their mood and behaviour, as well as to offer them opportunities to confide.

2   That, while young children in general have limited scope to access outside help for themselves, the school provides a readily available site in which there are known and trustworthy adults whom they might approach for assistance.

Embedded in these ideas there are, of course, a number of assumptions, not least that teachers have the time and aptitude to help children with their personal problems, and that they are people in whom children would choose to confide. We decided to ask children for their views on these matters and also to explore with them whether there are other ways in which schools might help. These might include the establishment of peer support schemes, now widely advocated as an egalitarian and educative means of supporting children with self-defined problems (Cowie and Sharp, 1996; Sharp and Cowie, 1998; Franklin, 2001; the Mental Health Foundation, 2001; Rowe, 2001). Or it might include activities such as Circle Time (Bliss *et al.*, 1995) and lessons in Personal, Health and Social Education (PHSE) (see Childline, 2001 for sample lesson plans), both of which are thought to promote co-operation and greater self-awareness amongst pupils by encouraging them to reflect together on topics such as loneliness, rivalry, or bullying.

Unfortunately, none of the schools in which we carried out our fieldwork operated a peer support scheme (not surprisingly as the majority of such schemes are found in secondary schools), and our data only reflect indirectly on the relevance of this to primary-school-aged children through their comments on confiding in friends. However, one of the schools held regular Circle Time sessions (known to the children as the 'Sharing Circle') and the other three operated an informal, ad hoc version of this concept. In what follows, we therefore focus on the children's attitudes towards talking to teachers, and on their views of whole-class activities which offer an indirect form of support. But before moving on to the data we would first like to address an issue that arose through our experience in the field; the difficulty of holding a private conversation with a child in a primary school.

Privacy and primary schools

What children invariably say that they want when they talk about family matters is privacy (Fawcett, 1997; Childline, 1998; Neale and Smart, 2001). However, if our experience is typical, it is difficult to speak to children privately in primary schools. We faced two main obstacles:

- The first is the design of schools. Those in which we worked were open plan, with groups of three-sided 'classrooms' clustered around shared activity areas. The only self-contained rooms were the offices of the headteacher, deputy head and school secretary; the staffroom; and storerooms. Some of our interviews were conducted, by default, in open areas with other children or adults working within hearing distance, and where there were frequent disruptions caused by teachers or pupils walking past. In situations where our interviews could be

overheard it was impossible for us, ethically, to encourage children to talk as openly as some of them would have liked. In these cases we tended to rely on indirect questions, for example, using vignettes.[1] The point we wish to make, however, is that, before children can reveal personal information at school, issues of privacy and confidentiality have to be addressed.

- We also found that the Child Protection policy that one school had adopted banned all adults from speaking to children on a one-to-one basis in a room with a closed door. We recognise that child protection raises complex issues which have to be a priority for schools, but such a defensive attitude must undermine the establishment of relations of trust between children and staff, as well as deprive children of the conditions necessary for talking in privacy.

In these circumstances it was perhaps unsurprising to discover that there was considerable variation in teachers' knowledge of their pupils' lives outside school, with some readily acknowledging that they knew very little. These teachers are unlikely to be unusual as McLaughlin and her colleagues have noted that 'seeing a child alone in privacy is the most uncommon activity to occur in a school' (McLaughlin *et al.*, 1999, p. 98).

Nevertheless, the everyday contact between children and their teachers makes the latter a valuable resource and we were interested in exploring children's attitudes towards teachers (as well as schools) as sources of support.

Talking to teachers

Our data suggest that for many children the quality of the relationship between the teacher and child, and the culture of the school, are important factors in determining whether they look to teachers for

personal help, or not. For some, the parameters of their relationships with teachers did not encompass confiding:

Q: *Would you tell a teacher?*

Rachel (10):   *Not really, because I wouldn't really cry at school ... I haven't really told them.*

Miriam (10):   *You can't really talk to a teacher because you have to see her every day, or him, and if you break down crying in the middle it's very embarrassing. So I mean, I wouldn't, I'd just talk to my mum about it or an understanding adult.*

In contrasting a teacher with an 'understanding' adult Miriam highlights how the teacher–pupil relationship tends to be seen by children as formal and asymmetrical rather than personal and empathic or reciprocal. This perhaps explains why, although a number of children told us that their teacher had sought them out to say that if they ever wanted to talk about their home situation they could, they invariably said that they had not taken this offer up, despite appreciating the fact that it had been made.

Richard (9):   *My mum told my teachers and they kept saying that I could talk to them.*

Q: *So did you ever?*

Richard: *Um, not much, no.*

Buffy (10):   *My teacher's really nice about it. She said that if ever I want to talk to her I can.*

Q: *And have you ever?*

Buffy: *Er ... well, I wrote this story about someone that ... mum and dad had split up, but I've never actually spoken to her about it.*

The prospect of confiding in a teacher was especially daunting to some of the younger children in the sample. Many of them saw their teachers as being too busy, or too impatient, to listen to them. As one group of six year olds explained:

Child: *Teachers never listen.*
Q: *Teachers don't listen?*
Child: *No.*
Child: *Not very good.*
Child: *You have to follow them around and pester them and tell them and say, 'Mrs Hughes, Mrs Hughes ...'*
Child: *And then she shouts at you, 'What is it now?'*

They were also put off by fears that the teacher would report whatever they had said to their parent:

Q: *Would Jay tell his teacher why he was upset?*
Cherie (6): *No. 'Cos if his mum comes to pick him up his teacher might say 'Why is your son being upset?' and 'He told me his dad hasn't picked him up.'*

There were, however, some exceptions to this, notably where there was considerable warmth in the teachers' relationships with their pupils. One five year old, who was in his third school, having already left two where he was 'always in trouble', was particularly attached to his present class teacher who gave him responsibility for tasks such as fetching the class register, making him feel trusted and dependable. His affection for his teacher was echoed by his classmate Paul who told us, 'My teacher is kind. She lets us have biscuits.' Both of these boys had decided views on the privacy of family matters but were responsive to personal attention. Their teacher instilled in them a belief that they mattered and they, in response, saw her as someone who was kind and fair, and who

would take an interest in their lives. Older children in the same school also saw their teachers as being concerned about them, and so as people they would confide in:

Louise (9):   *I talk to teachers when I feel lonely because they make you feel a bit happier.*

Jonathan (9): *I'd talk to a teacher in case my dad, he'd run away because the police were after him, he'd put my mum in hospital and teachers would have to take me home and look after me.*

Interestingly, one of the children in the sub-sample, when asked if he had a friend who had helped, said:

Michael (9):   *Mrs George, one of our helpers from school. And she gave me a blackcurrant drink and I told her everything what's happened.*

Classroom assistants have a different status to that of teachers, and can seem more approachable to many children. However, Michael's comments, when asked what it is about some adults that means they can become friends, were enlightening:

Michael (9):   *They are kind some of them. They are nice; they can be cheerful sometimes.*

His comments show that, just as with older children (Butler and Williamson, 1994; Fawcett, 1997; Sandbaek, 1999), it is the personal qualities of the adult concerned which children value and which prompt them to confide. Kindness was especially important to the children we spoke to. The offer of a biscuit or a drink, when they were unhappy, made them feel cared for and comforted. Cheerfulness mattered too, because it put their worries into perspective.

Whole-class activities and support

If many children would not confide in a teacher, there are nevertheless several ways in which schools can help children living through difficult transitions. The day-to-day activities and friendships found there can help children to forget their preoccupations. In other words, being at school can provide them with the opportunities to forget, and to be cheered up, which we have seen that children value:

Miriam (10): *I like to get in to work and like listen and everything and forget about it. And just like to have a laugh* [laughing].

Lauren (10): [Being in school] *took my mind off it.*

We also found that some formal classroom activities were seen as helpful. Mullender (2001) has noted that drama and discussion are a valuable and enjoyable means of offering children indirect support with domestic violence, as well as providing a forum for participative learning, and this appears to be true too of parental separation and repartnering. Children we spoke to enjoyed activities such as Circle Time and PHSE, describing how these had given them opportunities to discover practical solutions to common problems and everyday dilemmas:

Lucy (8): *My teacher said if you get mad any time at all you can always come to a cushion, you know, those big soft bean bag cushions. As long as somebody was watching you and you had your shoes off, and she said that you can scrunch paper and screw it up, screw up paper, scribble on it, you could do anything like that and you could punch the cushion but you aren't allowed to punch anyone else.*

These whole-class activities have the advantage of influencing school cultures, creating a more supportive and understanding environment. Even more importantly, they avoid the problem of children being singled out as 'needing' help, enabling them instead to unobtrusively take from the discussions whatever they find most helpful. Below, a group of ten-year-old children discuss their experiences of Circle Time, and one child reflects on how it has helped him:

Q: *Would you talk to a teacher* [if you had a problem]*?*

Child: *We have to rely on a Sharing Circle.*

Child: *Yeah we have our Sharing Circle. But I don't think anyone would say it in there because people might laugh at them.*

Child: *They wouldn't.* [All talking together]

Child: *Miss Callaghan* [class teacher], *she gets frustrated sometimes.*

Child: *Yeah like a girl came in and said 'somebody has been mean to me and pulling my hair' and Miss Callaghan wouldn't want to know.*

Child: *She would like say 'Oh you have to sort it out, go away and sort it out.'*

Q: *So what sort of things do you talk about in the Sharing Circle?*

Child: *Well, we talk about the problem or if ... what's it called er, like ... like, if you had a problem with somebody and they were annoying you they would probably talk about a subject but not actually saying names.*

Child: *Like, fighting and that.*

Child: *Like, revenge we talked about. Like, 'my sister did something, what would you do?'*

Child: *Like, just taking time out.*
(Year 5, group discussion)

JJ (10): *Miss Callaghan's taught me a lot this year. She's helped in Sharing Circle and everything.*

Q: *Can you think of one thing she's done or said that's helped that you could tell me?*

JJ: *It's not exactly something she's done. Well, it's something she's done, it's not anything she's said. I think Sharing Circle's done the help.*

Q: *So tell me about Sharing Circle. What's Sharing Circle?*

JJ: *We either think of a subject or think [how] to make things better.*

Q: *Have you ever talked about anything in the Sharing Circle? Or is it listening to what other people say that's helped?*

JJ: *Listening to other people say 'What do you say?' When it comes to my turn I'm a bit nervous, but ... We did one just a couple of days ago, a quick one ... because we sort of forgot about it. We did a 'how to sort ourselves'. I said, 'have a nice shower, forget about it', and Simon, this funny person, said 'I just bounce myself if I'm bored.'*

Here we can see that, while most of these children would not use Circle Time to reveal personal problems, it can nevertheless be helpful on a personal basis as well as providing a means of social education. JJ's choice of a Circle Time session which made him laugh is also instructive. He valued some of the more serious discussions in the group as these give him a chance to reflect on other people's suggestions about how 'to make things better' but having fun mattered too, for this helped him to cheer up and forget his troubles for a time.

Supporting children at school

The younger children are, the less scope they have for independently seeking out information or help which they might need. Schools are therefore increasingly being seen as places on which to focus, both in terms of training teachers to recognise signs that children may need help in handling problems outside the school, or targeting resources to facilitate children's opportunities to access help for themselves. A number of new initiatives are being tried, such as the appointment of learning mentors or the establishment of peer support schemes. As these were not widely available when we carried out the fieldwork for this study, however, we focused instead on children's attitudes towards being helped with family problems at school. What our findings show is that a majority of children prefer to keep their home lives private. Not only are they reluctant to do anything which might identify them to their classmates as having a problem (such as being seen in a tearful state, after talking privately to a member of staff), but many find teachers difficult to talk to on a personal basis because of the authority role which teachers have to adopt if they are to maintain class discipline and assess children's work. A number of teachers do manage to overcome these problems, and have the personal qualities which lead children to see them as approachable and kind, but these are probably a minority. This suggests that if schools are to take on a wider role in providing children with personal support this might best be achieved by non-teaching staff appointed for the specific purpose, or by outside organisations coming into the school on a regular basis. Children's privacy would, however, have to be safeguarded.

Certainly, for the children we spoke to, the most helpful assistance that schools gave was usually indirect. Especially for those for whom family transitions were a prelude to renegotiated but essentially stable family lives, the fact that being in school required them to focus on something other

than what was happening at home was constructive. By becoming absorbed in their lessons, or mixing with their friends, they achieved a respite from personal troubles. It is important that, in our desire to help children, we do not forget the benefits of normalisation.

Whole-class activities and discussions were also found helpful. These provide a means by which children can obtain information without being identified as 'needy', or becoming objects of attention. Concrete self-help strategies such as relaxation or anger management skills can also be learnt in whole-class groups. For many children these group activities are fun as well as useful. This gives them an immediate appeal, in contrast to 'confiding' talk, which children sometimes find emotionally draining, as our next chapter shows.

7 Participation and support

In recent years there has been a growing interest in work with children facing a parental separation. Most early initiatives were designed to help children indirectly by supporting or educating their parents (Wallerstein, 1991; Petersen and Steinman, 1994; Kelly, 2000). However, attention is now shifting to children themselves, in particular:

- engaging them in the negotiation of decisions that will affect them

- providing information and support to help them adjust to family change.

The Family Court Welfare Service (now Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service) now works directly with children (Buchanan *et al.,* 2001), rather than relying on parents' accounts of their children's views about arrangements. Furthermore, following a lengthy debate amongst mediators about the desirability of working directly with children (Simpson, 1991; Cockett and Tripp, 1994; Gentry, 1997), the Family Mediation Service (FMS) has begun to hold mediation sessions with children. Recognising that parental separation is not a single event, some FMS groups and other voluntary organisations have also established separate counselling services for children (see, for example, NCH Action for Children and Greater Manchester Probation Service; Oxfordshire Family Mediation Service; Family Care, Nottingham; all undated). Others work in schools, opening up discussion with whole-class groups about family change and how this can be managed or, like the organisation Rainbows, have set up school-based peer support groups for children coming to terms with separation or divorce (Rainbows, n.d.). The ethos underpinning these services varies widely, some having a welfare/problem orientation with children 'referred' for individual or group counselling by parents or teachers, while others emphasise children's agency and reach out to children themselves. Inevitably, in a study of this kind, we cannot hope to reflect the full range of activities taking place. Nevertheless, since there is, as yet, very little information on children's perspectives on these developments, this chapter summarises the views and experiences of the children we interviewed. Before moving on to the data, there are two preliminary points to be made:

1 *Only a minority of the children in the sample had had any contact with specialist outside agencies*. Of the children interviewed in school, seven referred to contact or residence proceedings of which they were the subject but none spoke of seeing a Court Welfare Officer, and only two mentioned Mediation or counselling. We quite deliberately chose to interview children in a way that allowed them to determine how much personal information they gave us, and it may be that some of them chose to withhold details of outside help which they were receiving. It is possible, though, that very few had needed or received specialist help, or participated directly in formal discussions about their parents' separation. In support of this, it is relevant that a number of children referred to their contacts with other outside agencies. Eight spoke openly of 'having' a social worker; a similar number talked of police intervention to resolve domestic disputes between their parents, and one discussed his contacts with a child psychologist. In view of this, we recruited a small sub-sample of eight children with direct experience of targeted support. Four of these had received counselling from voluntary organisations with dedicated separation/divorce services; two had been interviewed by Family Court Welfare Officers, and two had attended a Contact Centre for supported contact with a non-resident parent.

2 *Unless the children had already been in contact with Mediators or Court Welfare Officers, they were unaware of their existence.* When we asked the children general questions in focus groups about where outside help might come from, they spoke of solicitors, the courts, teachers, the police, social workers and Childline, but not the Court Welfare Service or Mediation. Of these, Childline was the only agency that they could see themselves contacting for advice unless they were already involved with Social Services. In these cases, if they had a good relationship with their social worker, they saw him or her as someone they could talk to. In other instances when they were faced with an emergency, they knew to contact the police by dialling 999. Otherwise, their expectation of there being any formal support for children was non-existent. This is not surprising, given that Fawcett (1997, 2000) has shown that adolescents lack information and choices about where to find targeted help with problems arising from parental separation. Nonetheless, the success of Childline in establishing itself as a resource shows that children of primary school age can have sufficient confidence to make independent use of services which 'belong' to them and to which they have ready access. On its own, however, Childline cannot provide children with the range of options and opportunities for choice in the support they seek out, which are needed.

In what follows, we look first at children's experiences of involvement with the Family Court Welfare Service and with Mediation, and then move on to their experiences of counselling. In the process, we raise issues about the extent to which children engage in active, as opposed to token, participation, and their attitudes towards talk as a way of coping.

Extending participation

There is a statutory requirement that children's views should be ascertained in private law proceedings affecting their care, but until recently there was considerable doubt about the wisdom of involving them directly in this process (Cantwell and Scott, 1995; DoH *et al.*, 1998). Most Court Welfare Officers (CWOs) and Mediators relied on parents to communicate their children's wishes and had no direct contact with children themselves. In these circumstances, it is unsurprising that there were children in our sample who had played no direct part in the resolution of contact or residence disputes. One such child was five-year-old Grady, who had been brought up for most of his life by his grandfather, and who described how he came to live with his mother and her new partner as follows:

Grady (5): *There were like two people who wanted me, two people who want same kid and then ... a mister told my mum, 'Grady's going to live with you', told my mum. He said I'd soon live with my mum and then grandad Tom phoned up and he, he wanted to live with me.*

Q: *He wanted you as well? Did anyone ask you who you wanted to live with?*

Grady: *No. I wanted to live with grandad Tom but I'm living with my mum ... A mister just thought which one I had to live with and he said that.*

Q: *Did the mister talk to you?*

Grady: *I just said a mister didn't I, 'cos I don't know what his name was. He's a stranger. I didn't even see him when he told me.*

This suggests that Grady was the subject of residence proceedings, although, if there was an assessment of his best interests (as there must

undoubtedly have been), then he was its object rather than its subject. It is important to avoid over-interpreting his comments, of course. Nonetheless, we might consider the effect on Grady of excluding him from the assessment process, particularly when he was aware of what was taking place and conscious of his inability to have any real influence on a decision that would have a profound effect upon his life.

Children can, however, be excluded from participation even when they are seen by CWOs or Mediators. Indeed, the language used in this context ('are seen') conveys the passive nature of the role that can be ascribed to them. Take the experience of Liam and April:

> Liam (6): *Once we went to a woman's office, Vicky. And we went to her playroom, right, and me and April made a cake. And there was a big house, well, a bit like a tent.*
>
> April (8): *What me and Liam* [did]*, we had to draw a picture first and tell where we live and ... we were all chatting together about* [unclear]. *And* [unclear] *if I said it was really good without dad, me and Liam would write it down on our paper ... And then we were playing and Vicky were talking to my mum.*
>
> Q: *So tell me why you went to see Vicky?*
>
> April: *Well, first of all because my mum and my dad left each other. And second ... well, I don't know why Vicky wanted to see us.*

Liam and April had enjoyed meeting 'Vicky' and were happy to talk about their visit to her office. But they had little idea why the meeting had taken place. This does not mean that they lacked the capacity to understand its purpose, or that the CWO gave them no information. Maybe, in a strange environment, meeting an unfamiliar adult

for the first time, they simply did not take in whatever they were told. Alternatively, there may have been a decision to 'protect' them by inquiring indirectly into their views, using play-based techniques or projective tests. The point we want to make is that, lacking a clear understanding of the purpose of the meeting, the children were unable to participate fully. They had no opportunity to voice their own agenda, or even to decide whether they *wanted* to make their wishes known. This raises questions about the benefits to the children of such a meeting, and whether their interests were simply being subsumed to those of the court process.

It is not our intention here to be critical of the practitioners involved in these two cases. We recognise that children's proceedings are complex and children themselves are a heterogeneous group. Some may well be anxious about the effect upon people they care for of openly voicing their feelings, while others will feel deprived if they are excluded from participation. However, we would suggest that it is preferable to give children opportunities to decide for themselves how far they want to participate rather than to make this decision *for* them, without their knowledge. Children themselves invariably say that they want genuine choices about whether or not they will talk to practitioners, and to be clear about how whatever views they express will be used and communicated. We understand that some Mediators do, in fact, negotiate children's participation in this way, and make the compilation of written and agreed 'statements', which express the children's wishes and views in their own words, the focus of any subsequent meetings (see, for example, Milton Keynes Family Mediation Service). But this was not the experience of the children we met.

Counselling

The advantages of working openly with children, and giving them real information and choices,

became apparent once we interviewed children with experience of counselling. One of the difficulties that CWOs and Mediators face is that their contacts with children are brief, usually involving one or, at most, two meetings. Counselling has the benefit of being extended over some six or more sessions, creating an opportunity for both children and counsellors to get to know each other. Many children need this time to overcome their shyness faced with an adult they do not know. Nine-year-old Michael, for example, said he felt 'nervous and scared' when he first met his counsellor, because 'I didn't really know her'. It was only by working with her over a period of time that he became sufficiently confident and relaxed to open up to her and to challenge her.

We found that the children we spoke to who had been counselled by a practitioner they had grown to know and trust, like those children in the sample who had a good relationship with a social worker, were practised interviewees. They related to us in a more self-assured manner than many of their peers, and were well informed about issues like confidentiality. Indeed, Buffy said that, for her, confidentiality was a crucial feature of counselling:

Q:	*It sounds like you trust Hilary?*
Buffy (11):	*Yes, because I've seen her loads of times and she hasn't told Mummy any of the things I told her.*
Q:	*And is that important?*
Buffy:	*Yeah, because sometimes I don't want her to tell stuff.*

On the other hand, as Buffy's last comment infers, there are times when children *do* want information passed on. For the two younger children in this sub-category, it was the counsellor's role as an advocate that they valued, because this meant that they could rely on her to communicate messages to their parents which they did not want to voice themselves:

Q:	*How would Jeanie help Ben?*
Spike (6):	*By stop making him* [him being] *sad. By telling his mum to let him go at his daddy's house sometimes.*

The crucial point is that it was the children who were in charge of whether or not information was passed on. It was only if they asked for, or agreed to, something being said to their parents that this occurred. Otherwise, the contents of their counselling sessions were private.

Turning to the methods used by the counsellors, these involved a mixture of play and talk for the younger children:

Spike (6):	*I went in this play area and she asked me some things.*
Michael (9):	*She let us draw pictures on a board and she let us draw things on paper.*

All of the children were enthusiastic about using physical activities and games to express (and sometimes resolve) feelings, and were equally keen on learning practical skills such as breathing exercises which helped them to relax. However, there was more ambivalence towards talking, which dominated the older children's counselling sessions. Asked if she felt counselling helped, Buffy said:

I don't know whether this is good or bad, but it makes me think about daddy a lot, and what happened.

She continued:

Buffy:	*Sometimes* [it helps to talk]. *Not always, but sometimes.*
Q:	*Tell me a little bit about the times it doesn't help.*
Buffy:	*Sometimes I don't really feel like going because I just don't really want to talk about things.*
Q:	*And when are the times when it does help?*

Buffy: *Sometimes when I really need to speak about things and I can't speak to my mum.*

The formal nature of the counselling sessions gave Buffy no opportunity to choose her moment for confiding. So, much as she appreciated the support of her counsellor, there were times when, knowing that their meeting would put her in touch with feelings she would rather not confront, she approached it with apprehension. There is an assumption that talking helps children by clarifying their feelings and enabling them to communicate their anxieties. What Buffy points to is that it is demanding and can sometimes intensify emotional tension, rather than alleviate it.

It has been suggested that boys can be more reluctant to talk about problems than girls (Macleod and Barter, 1996), and it was a boy who expressed the most negative attitude towards counselling. He subscribed to the notion that, in principle, it is a good idea but said:

Ocky (11): *That one mum did* [send me to] *didn't work ... All I did was play with the toys they had there and I never talked once.*
Q: *Why didn't you talk to the counsellor?*
Ocky: *Because I don't like talking.*
Q: *Is there anything the counsellor could have done that would have made it better?*
Ocky: *I don't think they can. They say they can but I don't think they can. I think that's a load of crap but I'm not allowed to say that ... Well, it didn't work for me.*

Four years after his parents' separation Ocky remained 'angry with mum for leaving dad and moving so far away'. He is precisely the sort of child it is assumed should benefit from counselling and it is important to consider why it did not work for him, especially as the reasons for such failures are often attributed to some incapacity in the child.

In Ocky's case, it would be easy to say that the responsibility lay with him, since he refused to talk. However, there are some clues as to other reasons in his comments. The decision that he should see a counsellor was not Ocky's but his mother's; he saw himself as having had no choice in the matter. He also lacked confidence in his ability to talk (telling us, before his interview began, that he was 'not good at' it), and believed, presumably based on experience, that the vehemence of his opinions would annoy an adult listener. None of these things should have prevented him from having a positive experience of counselling, given time and a counsellor he could relate to. But the reliance of many voluntary organisations on volunteers to staff their programmes means that some counsellors have relatively little experience or training, and may lack the expertise to work with children like Ocky. In saying this, we do not want to appear to be critical of people who do their best to help. It is the lack of alternative resources which is the main problem.

To conclude, in much of this report we have, of necessity, concentrated on the experiences of children who were unhappy about some aspect of their family lives. *It is important to remember that many children rise to the challenge of family transitions without the need for outside intervention. The support of parents, close family and friends, can be all they need to manage their initial upset. Indeed, most children prefer informal to formal support.* Nonetheless, if they or their parents are struggling to cope, children will usually talk to professionals or volunteers, given the opportunity. There will always be those who need outside assistance, and the trend towards involving children more directly in the family law process is also likely to continue. It is therefore important to ensure that the services that children become involved with are child-centred. The data in this chapter are based on the experiences of a very few children, but their experiences draw attention to some fundamental points:

- Children are knowing subjects and need real (rather than token) choices about whether or not they will participate in formal aspects of the legal or mediation process, or in counselling.

- The value of one-off contacts with practitioners to 'ascertain children's views' is highly questionable and meets the needs of the legal process better than it does those of children. Children are happiest disclosing their feelings and opinions when they are familiar with, and know they can trust, the person they are speaking to.

- Working with children is a skilled activity. They are remarkably tolerant of adults who are inexperienced as practitioners but genuine in their desire to help; nonetheless, inept interventions sometimes do real harm. It should not be assumed that this is work which can always be done by volunteers.

- The emphasis on 'talk' as the primary constituent of therapy or counselling can be unhelpful to young children, many of whom prefer alternative activity and play-based methods.

- Finally, as the children in the preceding chapters point out, having fun, and being cheered up, are essential ingredients in managing change.

8 Issues for policy and practice

In this chapter, we will draw together some of the main findings from our research. A number of issues that arise have relevance for policy and practice and we offer them here as suggestions that may help to guide thinking in the future.

Children's experiences of parental separation are highly diverse

The normative image of children facing a parental separation that informs policy debates centres on divorce. It portrays families in which two married parents separate after a lengthy period of mutually satisfying cohabitation, during which time they jointly raised their children. However, we found that half of the children in our sample were from families that diverged from this image. The family and parenting arrangements that they experienced were highly diverse. They ranged from 'intact' families where parents had spent periods of time living apart, through those where parents had never lived together or where they had formed a series of cohabiting relationships, to a small number in which children were cared for by members of their extended family. We have referred to these different families as 'aggregated', 'divorced', 'meshed' and 'diasporic'. These terms will be useful if they help to remind us of the reality of family diversity.

There is a risk of a growing divergence between the concept of 'the family' which informs policy debates and the diverse experiences of family life of many children.

Divorce is only one of many problems which some children face

The construction of an essentially middle-class 'model' of separation and divorce draws attention away not only from diversity in family structures but also from differences in children's life chances. Whilst it is important to recognise the implications of a separation for children from well-resourced

families, it is equally important to be responsive to its effects on those whose families have fewer material, social or emotional resources. Separation or divorce was only one of many adversities with which a number of the children in this study were coping. Additional pressures included parental ill-health or unemployment; poor housing conditions; family violence; limited parental manifestations of care; and, in some cases, drug abuse and crime. Some had spent periods of time accommodated by the local authority or living with a relative.

Studies that focus exclusively on the process of divorce overlook the fuller picture of the adversities that some children face. We think that the artificial distinctions whereby matters such as divorce, poverty, crime and family violence are discussed as discrete social issues are unhelpful, and obscure the realities of children's lives.

This in turn has implications for the delivery of support services. The combining of Court Welfare Officers (who traditionally deal with children and divorce in the private law system) and Guardians ad Litem (who traditionally deal with children in difficulties in the public law system) in CAFCASS holds the promise of demolishing the false distinction between children in need based on legal categories rather than real life. *Our research would therefore support the principle of a unified service which lies at the foundation of CAFCASS.*

There is broad agreement among children about support during family transitions

Although there is enormous diversity in children's experiences and life chances, there is an impressive level of agreement amongst them about what matters when parents separate and the support that they find helpful at these times.

Having someone whom children can trust and confide in is important but they also want opportunities to keep as many 'normal' aspects of their own lives going as possible. Opportunities to 'forget' about what is happening and to be cheered up matter just as much as

being able to talk about what is happening and to participate in the decisions that have to be made.

When parents are unable to help, children's most accessible source of support is from other family members and friends

One of the biggest handicaps faced by young children upset by family reordering is their limited scope for accessing outside help, especially if their parents are preoccupied with their own problems. Many of them rely on support from their wider family and friends, and *these relationships would benefit from wider recognition in the policy sphere.*

Children are discriminating about accepting outside help

Children are highly discriminating in the help they will accept. Informal confidants are chosen for their personal qualities, amongst which are trustworthiness, empathy, kindness and cheerfulness. These same qualities also matter when children come into contact with outside agencies; *the way in which practitioners relate to children is a vital ingredient in the establishment (or not) of a helping relationship.*

Choice and respect

One of the central aspects of helping relationships which children look for is respect. *Children want to be treated as persons.* They want real, as opposed to token, opportunities to decide for themselves if the help offered is for them. They also want their views to be listened to and treated with genuine consideration.

Does talking always help children?

There is considerable interest among policy makers and practitioners in talking to children. Attention is currently focused on widening opportunities for children to 'talk' to Family Court Reporters or Mediators about post-divorce family arrangements, or to speak to counsellors about the emotional adjustments that they face. While this benefits some children there is a risk of creating a culture in which children are expected to talk. *Not all children want to talk. Invitations to children to meet with practitioners should include genuine options for them to decline. This is particularly important when, as can be the case in meetings with Family Reporters, they will not have the option of speaking in confidence.* With regard to counselling, while some children find it helpful to work with a counsellor, the increasing emphasis on talk as children become older is stressful for some. *It is not simply that confiding is an activity more associated with older, rather than younger, children, but that many prefer activity and skills-based methods.*

The role of schools

The diversity in children's circumstances and needs, and the difficulties which young children face in accessing outside help, means that flexible and imaginative solutions are needed, especially if opportunities for children to exercise some choice in the matter of being helped are to be enhanced. Although many children prefer to keep their family lives private when in school, schools can play a significant role in promoting children's agency and providing a contact point for the dissemination of information. *Participative activities for whole-class groups such as drama, discussion or Circle Time are popular with children and provide an unobtrusive means by which they can obtain information or learn concrete skills (such as relaxation), thereby widening their choices and means of helping themselves.*

Tackling issues of family change with whole-class groups may also promote a more positive culture within schools. *Hurtful verbal taunting about some children's home circumstances remains an*

unattractive feature of playground cultures and needs to be addressed.

Supporting families

The dependency of young children and those in middle childhood should not be ignored. Our study reveals that children want opportunities for participation and choice, but they also appreciate things being done for them, and knowing they can rely on receiving material manifestations of care. Being cared for is central to children's lives. *The quality of relationships with biological and social parents, and with wider kin, is probably the single most important factor in determining how well children cope with family transitions.* Support for families cannot be divorced from support for children and should be an integral part of a continuum of accessible services and solutions.

Notes

Chapter 2

1   This normative model is, of course, culturally specific. Nonetheless, there is a sense in which minority ethnic families, too, are expected to 'fit' into cultural norms in the UK.

2   We are not suggesting here that research on divorce has failed to address topics such as family poverty or violence. These issues have received plenty of attention (see, Joshi, 2000; Buchanan *et al.*, 2001; Reynolds, 2001). Rather, we are referring to public debates and their particular content and concerns. Having said this we would, however, note that research studies, by their nature, invariably have closely defined objectives. So, poverty, for instance, may be examined solely in terms of the impact of divorce on family incomes, rather than in relation to its wider manifestations. This, in its own way, can contribute to a certain amount of compartmentalisation, unless balanced by meta-analyses and reviews.

Chapter 4

1   Speaking on BBC Radio 4, *Desert Island Discs*, 20 December 2001.

Chapter 6

1   Fortunately, school staff were extremely helpful. One headteacher gave up his office to us and, in other schools, some teachers alerted us to empty classrooms. If the weather allowed, there was also the option to interview children outdoors, on empty playing fields. It was only in these cases, when the children had privacy, that we felt able to follow up their more personal disclosures.

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Appendix: Research methods and sampling procedure

The schools' sample

At Elm Hill, New Hackney and Woodforde schools, we worked with children in Years 2 (aged six to seven years) and 5 (aged nine to ten years) but, at Brookside, because of other projects which the children in these classes were engaged in, we worked instead with the Year 1 (aged five to six years) and Year 4 (aged eight to nine years) groups.

Information about the study was circulated to the children's parents before beginning work in both Stages One and Two. On the advice of the headteachers of three schools we used an opt-out consent process. Parents were asked to contact us, or the class teacher, if they wanted more information or did not want their children to take part. At Elm Hill, which had a policy of requiring positive parental consent, we worked only with children whose parents gave written permission. These different consent processes highlighted a number of issues in relation to children's research participation. For instance, we were approached by children at Elm Hill who asked to take part but who could not be involved as their parents had not returned a consent slip. One child with separated parents then attempted to forge their parent's consent as a way of gaining entry to the study. We do not have the space in this report to discuss the ethical questions involved but, clearly, consent involves complex issues on which there is, at present, no consensus. Details of the consents received at Elm Hill for Stage One are summarised in Table A1.1. The numbers of children taking part in Stage One in all four schools are given in Table A1.2.

In addition to providing information about children's perceptions of family change, the work

Table A1.1 Stage One consents – Elm Hill

	Class size	Permission given	Permission refused	No reply
Class 2a	27	15	3	9
Class 2b	27	13	3	11
Class 5a	29	19	2	8
Class 5b	30	23	5	2

Table A1.2 Stage One – numbers of participating children: all schools

	Year 1/2		Year 4/5	
	Boys	**Girls**	**Boys**	**Girls**
Brookside	18	13	12	17
Elm Hill	12	16	20	22
New Hackney	11	19	10	14
Woodforde	11	6	12	21

carried out during Stage One gave children an opportunity to become familiar with us and to decide if they would like to talk about any relevant experiences of their own in an individual interview.

The numbers of children taking part in Stage Two interviews are summarised in Table A1.3. Information on the numbers of children in each class we were able to identify as having experience of parental separation is shown in Table A1.4.

At Elm Hill, where we needed written parental consent to interview children at each stage of the study, permission was given to involve six of the ten Year 2 children with separated parents during Stage One and five during Stage Two. An interview with a Year 2 child from an intact family was carried out to avoid disappointing her. Of the 14 target children in Year 5, seven were interviewed in Stage One and five in Stage Two.

Table A1.3 Children taking part in Stage Two interviews

	Year 1/2		Year 4/5	
	Boys	**Girls**	**Boys**	**Girls**
Brookside	4	2	1	6
Elm Hill	3	3	3	2
New Hackney	2	3	3	5
Woodforde	2	2	2	4

Table A1.4 Children with experience of a parental separation

	Year 1/2		Year 4/5	
	Class size	**Target children found**	**Class size**	**Target children found**
Brookside	31	13	29	11
Elm Hill A	27	6	29	11
Elm Hill B	27	4	30	3
New Hackney	30	11	24	9
Woodforde	17	5	33	8

The community sub-sample

During the course of our visits to organisations providing specialist services for children with separated parents, we asked practitioners if they would circulate information about the study to the families of children with whom they had worked, or to leave copies of our leaflets in their waiting rooms and reception areas. The same request was made of the Yorkshire Family Court Welfare Service. Four hundred leaflets were distributed in this way and replies were received from the parents of eight children expressing interest in taking part. This was fewer than we had hoped, although we were aware that recruiting research participants by such an indirect means, particularly for a study of children's experiences of separation and divorce, is notoriously difficult (Smart *et al.,* 2001).

Methods

Our primary aim was to engage with children's own perspectives so we prioritised research methods that enabled the children to respond to our enquiries on their own terms. In Stage One, the children took part in informal focus groups. With our supervision, small groups of five or six children worked to collaboratively develop stories about family reordering. The discussions that arose in the course of this activity gave us an insight into the general concerns of the children in relation to family life and its various transitions. It was only in the individual interviews that we touched on matters private to each child's family. These individual interviews were loosely structured and conversational in style. They focused on the children's accounts of their family histories and experiences, and their ideas about how family transitions could be managed. Drawing was used with the children in Years 1 and 2 as a way of reducing the intensity of a one-to-one interview and as an alternative means of communication. In all the interviews, we gave the children three vignettes describing some typical dilemmas in reordered families, allowing them to move away from their own experiences to a more general consideration of how things 'should' or might work.

Children in the community sub-sample were interviewed in a similar way, with the interviews following the same format as those in Stage Two but with the addition of more detailed questions about the children's experiences of formal support. The eight children (four boys and four girls) were all seen in their own homes. A brother and sister were interviewed together; one boy was interviewed, at his request, with his mother sitting nearby; and five were happy to be interviewed alone. Four children (two boys and two girls) were aged between six and eight years, and four were aged between nine and 11 years.