Schools and family change

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Schools and family change

School-based support for children experiencing divorce and separation

Anji Wilson and Janet Edwards, with Susie Allen and Carol Dasgupta

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1 Background to the project

Introduction

In 1999, 55 per cent of divorcing couples had one or more children under the age of 16 (National Statistics, 2001). Children whose parents cohabit rather than marry are even more likely to see their parents separate. For example, estimates suggest that over half of cohabiting unions end before the first child's fifth birthday (Kiernan, 1999). While many of these children will be distressed and troubled by their parents' separation, given time, most will adjust normally. A minority, however, are at increased risk of a number of adverse outcomes compared with children in intact families. Reviews of the evidence suggest, in the medium to long term, these children are more likely to: do worse at school; experience poor psychological well-being; move into adulthood sooner (e.g. leave home and school, start a long-term relationship, and become parents earlier); and have difficulties coping with their own relationships (Richards, 1996; Rodgers and Pryor, 1998; Corlyon, 1999; Pryor and Rodgers, 2001). It is not the divorce itself that accounts for these poorer outcomes for children. Rather, divorce has been shown to be part of a process and children's well-being is influenced by their experiences prior to and following the divorce or family change.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation recently commissioned a review of the evidence on the support available to children experiencing parental separation (Hawthorne *et al.*, 2003). A prominent finding was that few of the limited number of programmes offering support have been evaluated. However, work conducted in the United States suggests that group work with children may alleviate some of the negative effects associated with parental separation (Grych and Fincham, 1992). Perhaps most importantly, researchers have reported that children value the opportunity to talk to others who have undergone similar experiences of family change and to talk to people who can help them communicate with their parents about important family issues (Lyon *et al.*, 1998; O'Quigley, 2000; Smart and Neale, 1999; Neale and Wade, 2000).

The format and aims of the support

This collaborative project between practitioners and researchers was developed to assess whether a school-based intervention with children could help them adjust better to their parents' separation. Children aged between five and 11 were randomly assigned to either a small group intervention or one-to-one sessions, run in school hours by experienced child counsellors. Both the group and individual sessions shared similar aims. These were to:

- acknowledge and normalise diverse family situations and to discuss some of the difficulties inherent in them

- help children express and name their feelings, particularly those often present after a parental separation, and help them understand that these feelings may be a 'normal' reaction to family changes

- encourage children to explore thoughts and feelings about their current family structure and the family that they have 'lost'

- encourage children to recognise positive as well as negative aspects of their families

- help children to form a healthy sense of their own identity and an ability to think about the future in a positive manner

- promote peer group support among children in the group sessions and help them to derive reassurance from hearing other children's stories.

Group sessions

Group sessions involved between four and seven children, who met once a week for seven weeks. A short reunion session was held at the beginning of the term following the main work. The sessions lasted about 45 minutes. Separate groups were organised for children aged five to seven years (infant level) and for children aged seven to 11 years (junior level). At the request of one school an additional group was run with four to five year olds. This pilot group followed a shortened and adapted version of the support and was not included in the main evaluation.

The group sessions involved games and activities designed to build the group's identity and to meet the aims set out above. When the support work finished children were given name cards, stickers and a photograph of the group to take home. Each counsellor had an adult helper in the group who provided extra practical and emotional support where necessary. The helpers had experience of mediation, counselling or teaching support work.

Individual sessions

Individual sessions took place once a week for four weeks. Each session lasted approximately 30 minutes. One follow-up session was also arranged for about five weeks after the main work. Children engaged in similar activities in the individual sessions as in the groups and also took home mementoes of their involvement designed to remind them of their individual value and identity.

As far as school life allowed, group and individual sessions were held at the same time and place each week.

Further details about the support

Brief details about the aims of each session are provided in Appendix 1 or email: familymediation@cambridgefms.freeserve.co.uk.

Research aims and method

The research element of the project sought to examine both the effectiveness and acceptability of these different types of support. During and following the intervention, children's progress was assessed using measures obtained from questionnaires and interviews with children, their parents and their teachers. All of these participants, plus head teachers and counsellors, were invited to say what they thought about the support work. The project aimed to answer the following questions:

- What is the impact of school-based support?

- What is the experience of those involved in the work?

- Are there differences between the group and individual approaches with regard to their impact and acceptability?

- Is school a suitable setting for this type of work?

- What can be learnt from the project about developing support for separating parents and their children?

Report outline

The findings from the research are summarised in the following chapters. In particular, Chapter 3 reports on any changes recorded on psychometric measures of children's behaviour and well-being over the course of the project; Chapter 4 recounts whether children and parents felt that the intervention made a difference to children's lives; Chapters 5 to 7 describe participants' experiences of the intervention; Chapter 8 considers issues around implementing similar support in the school setting; and Chapter 9 provides a summary of the key findings and the main conclusions for the project.

2 Evaluating the support work

Recruiting schools and families

Although three-quarters of the state and private schools informed about the project initially expressed an interest in participating, resource constraints meant that it was possible to include only seven of these thirty-five schools in the final project. Only state schools were involved in the final project because they had sufficient numbers of pupils with whom to run individual and group sessions.

Parents were recruited through slightly different means depending on the policy of the school. The majority of parents were sent a letter and invited to complete the reply slip if they were interested.

They were then followed up with a phone call from the researcher. In two schools, parents were invited to 'opt out' of the study rather than 'opt into' it. Those parents who remained were telephoned by the researcher to discuss the project. A summary of the recruitment process is shown in Figure 1.

Who was eligible to take part?
Children were included in the project if they had some experience of parental separation. This included children whose parents had separated and children who had experienced the separation of resident parents from subsequent partners.

Figure 1   Summary of the project methodology and the recruitment process in the majority of the schools
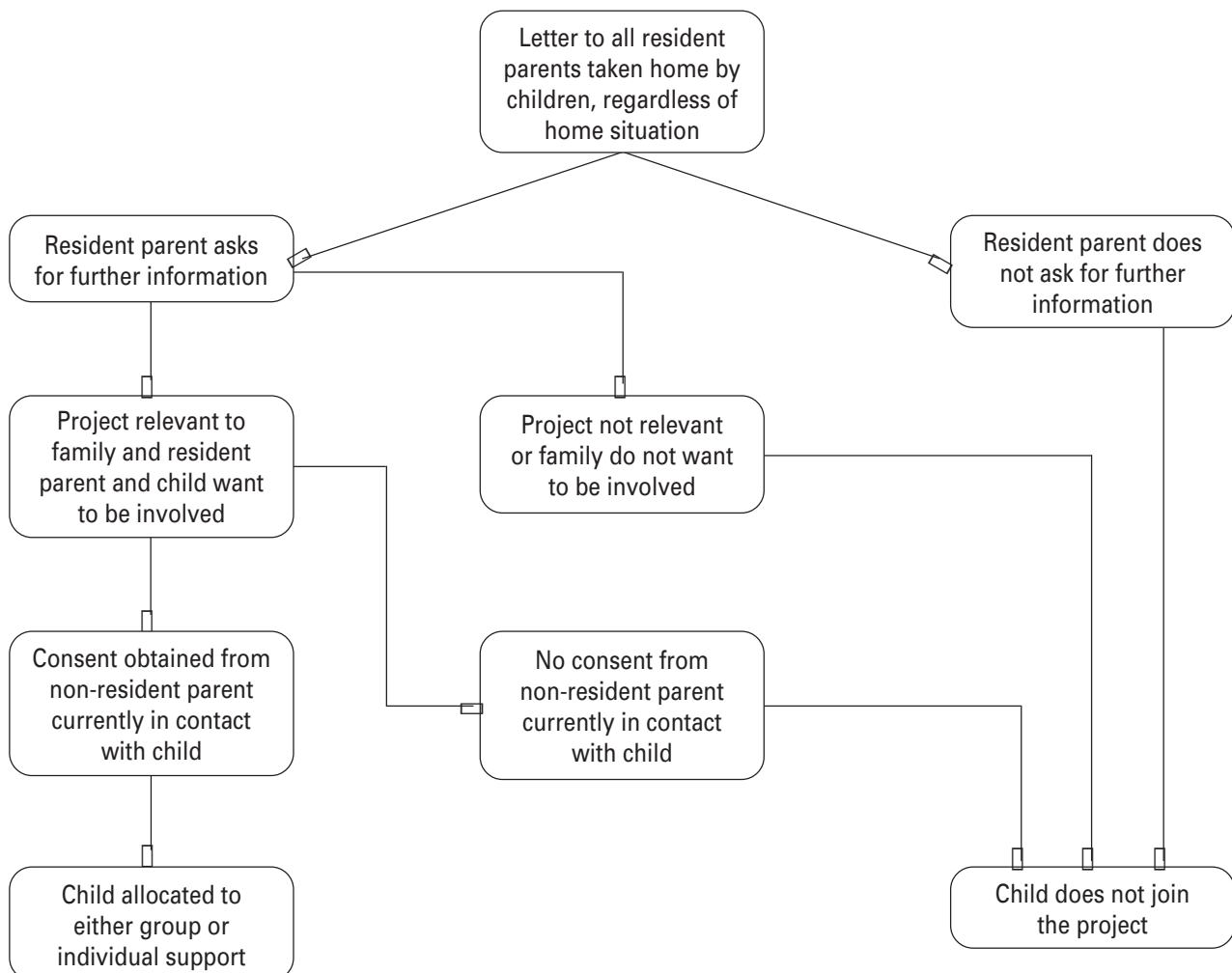
Obtaining participants' consent

In addition to the consent of the resident parent, that of the non-resident parent was obtained where he or she was in regular contact with the child. Five non-resident parents refused consent. Consent was also sought from the children. Initially, children were given information about the project and the opportunity to ask questions when the researcher first visited the home to meet with a resident parent and any eligible children. At that point, written consent was obtained from the parent and verbally from the children (although some asked to sign their parents' forms too). In the early stages of recruitment it became clear that children were confused at meeting so many different people who were involved in the project (e.g. researcher meeting with them at home, researcher doing

questionnaires at school with them, the counsellors). As a consequence, the procedure was changed so that the project was discussed and children's consent sought in a brief meeting at school with the same researcher who would complete the evaluation questionnaires with the children. More details of the recruitment process are provided in Appendix 2.

The evaluation process

The views of children, parents and teachers were collected just before the support work commenced, on completion of the support work and six months following its end. The evaluation stages and how they fitted into the support work are summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 2 Summary of how the evaluation process ran alongside the support work
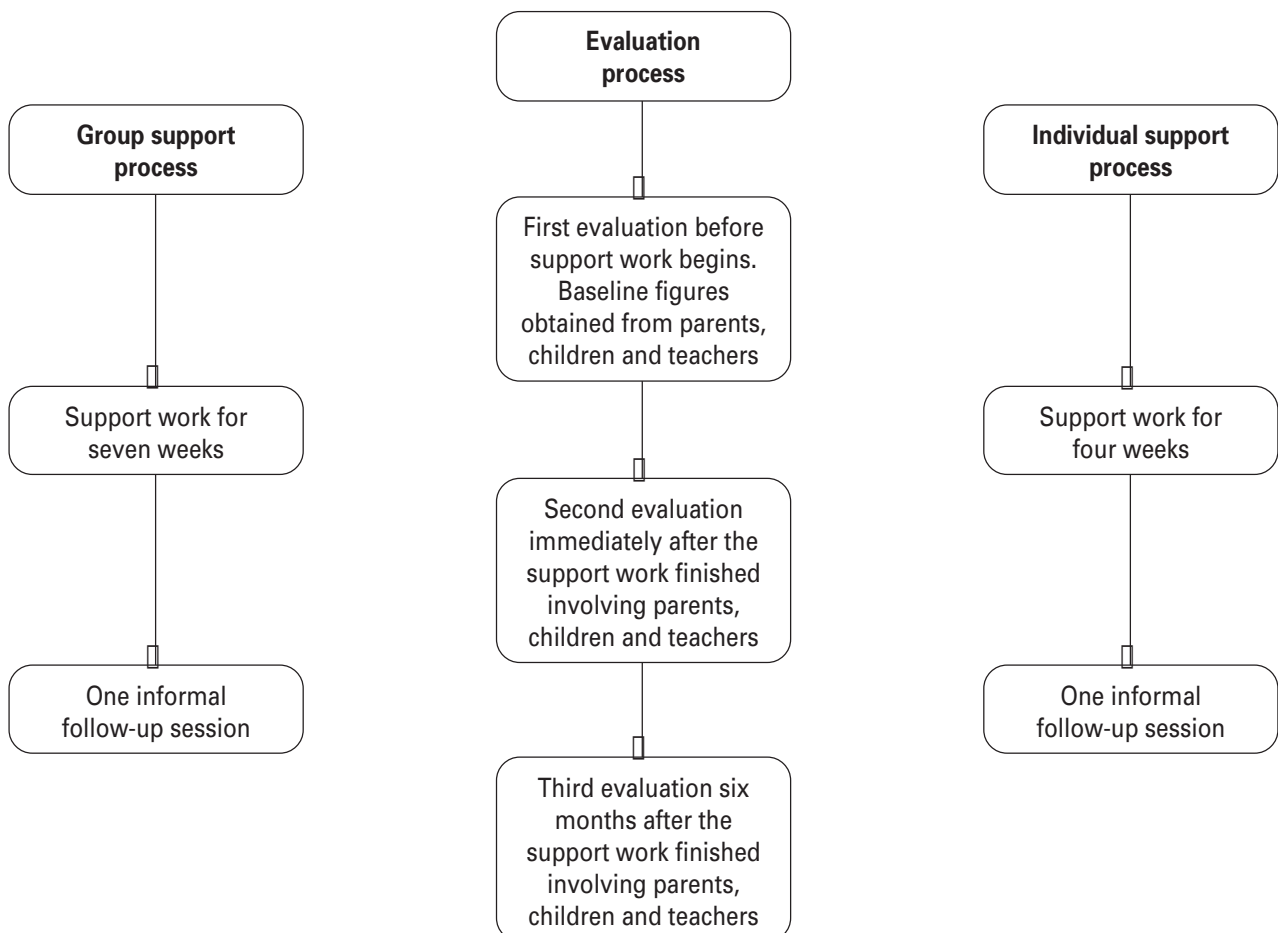
Interviews with children

At each data collection stage, children were interviewed and invited to complete a booklet comprising open and closed questions. Interviews were conducted in a private space out of the main classroom and on each occasion the interviews comprised two 30-minute meetings with a researcher. She generally saw the children on two separate days so as not to keep them from class too long or to tire them. The interviews covered relationships with family and friends, children's views about themselves, their experience of the intervention and whether it changed anything for them. The children also completed a number of psychometric scales.

Interviews with parents

Parents were interviewed at the same time as the children but at home rather than at school. The interviews comprised open and closed questions. Background information about the families was gathered and parents were asked to comment on children's attitudes and behaviour and any changes in these observed over the course of and following the support work. Parents also completed a number of psychometric scales examining aspects of children's psychological well-being and behaviour.

Interviews with teachers

Before, immediately following its end and six months after the support work had finished, teachers filled in self-completion booklets comprising open questions about the children and the support work and psychometric scales on aspects of child behaviour and competence.

Interviews with head teachers

Head teachers were interviewed immediately following the work and six months later about its impact on the children and on school life, and to report on any feedback they received from teachers.

Counsellors

Two counsellors were involved in running the intervention. Their experiences were recorded during the support work and they also submitted individual reports following its close.

Interpreting the qualitative data

The interviews with children provided rich accounts of their experience of the support work. As far as possible, the data have been treated as a true account of participants' experiences, and their interpretation and reporting approached in an objective and straightforward manner. However, it is recognised that some of the data are open to more therapeutic interpretations that have not been pursued by the researchers. For example, practitioners pointed out that when children described the support work as boring it could be their way of saying it is uncomfortable.

Details of the sample

Number of children involved in each format

Where possible, children were randomly allocated to the respective formats. In some cases this was not possible because it was necessary to avoid putting siblings in the same group or to avoid a single girl or boy being in a group of the opposite gender. Table 1 shows the numbers of children allocated to each format.

Profile of the schools

The project took place in a large city in East Anglia among seven state schools. These comprised two infant schools, one junior school and four primary schools. The schools ranged in size from just under 200 to almost 500 on roll. They varied from approximately 20 per cent to just under 70 per cent in the proportion of children they considered as having special needs (from published figures). They also varied widely on their published standard assessment levels at age 11 for English, Mathematics and Science. Three of the schools

Table 1   The number and gender of children allocated to each format

Support format	Infant children	Junior children	Total
Individual			
Boys	6	12	18
Girls	0	13	13
Group			
Boys	8	12	20
Girls	5	13	18
Total	19	50	69

performed below Local Education Authority and national figures for English and Mathematics, and two below these levels for Science.

Profile of the families

A total of 50 families, comprising 69 children drawn from seven local state schools, took part in the project. The majority of children (82 per cent) taking part in the intervention lived in households headed by a single parent. In over two-thirds of cases (72 per cent), the child's parents were married before their separation and had been together, on average, nine and a half years. The length of time since the parental separation occurred varied between less than a year and over ten years ago, although in the majority of cases parents had separated in the last five years. Six children had subsequently experienced the breakdown of a relationship between the resident parent and a new parent figure. One third of the families had more than one child working with the project.

A fuller profile of the families is provided in Table A3.1 in Appendix 3. The data show that children were drawn from a range of backgrounds, with parents varying by age, education, employment and occupation.

Despite random allocation, some significant differences, reported in Appendix 3 (Table A3.2), were found between families of children involved in the respective formats in their socio-economic circumstances and demographic characteristics. These differences were taken into account when conducting the statistical analysis of the evaluation results (see Chapter 3) and should also be borne in mind when any differences between results from the different formats are described.

3 The impact of the support on the children: results from the statistical analysis

To avoid any bias associated with including the results for children where more than one child from a family took part in the study, the sample for the statistical analysis included only the youngest child involved in the project from any one family. This reduced the sample to 50 children. The analysis addressed two questions: (i) How did the children respond to the work over time? (ii) Were there important differences in the impact of the two different formats of support?

Ten measures, described in Table 2, were calculated from scores on the child, teacher and parent psychometric scales. Children were assessed before the work started, immediately following it and six months after its completion. The scores from the initial evaluation sessions, before children were involved in any support work, are referred to as 'baseline' scores in the report.

Were any changes observed in the children immediately following support and six months after it ended?

Table 3 summarises the changes observed in children's mood and behaviour during and following the support work. The upward-pointing arrows indicate an improvement in mood or behaviour when scores from each assessment point were compared. Overall, the children improved on seven out of the ten measures when baseline scores were compared to scores obtained immediately after the work and when the latter were compared

Table 2 Measures calculated from child, parent and teacher questionnaires before the support work started, immediately following it and six months after its end

Source of measure	Assessment measure calculated at baseline and the two follow-ups	Description of the measure
Measures based on psychometric scales completed by the child	Self-esteem	How the child felt about themselves
	Best friendship	Whether the child felt they had a best friend and how they felt about that relationship
	School friendships	The child's experience of relating to other children and how much she or he felt they belonged
	Support from adults	Whether the child felt there were supportive adults available to them
	Mood	Child's mental health, outlook and general level of happiness and well-being
Measures based on psychometric scales completed by the parent about the child	Child social behaviour	How well the child relates to and gets on with others
	Child difficult behaviour	Level of difficult, aggressive or challenging behaviour shown by the child
Measures based on psychometric scales completed by the teacher about the child	Child social behaviour	How well the child relates to and gets on with others
	Child difficult behaviour	Level of difficult, aggressive or challenging behaviour shown by the child
	Classroom competence	An assessment of the child's all-round adjustment at school, including their popularity, and sporting and academic performance

with scores obtained six months later. When baseline scores were compared with those obtained six months later, the children showed improvements on eight out of ten measures.

On some measures children appeared to do worse or to change very little. According to children's accounts of their best friendship and teachers' reports of children's social behaviour, the final average scores were returning towards baseline scores after initial improvement immediately following the support work. According to parents' reports of children's difficult behaviour, hardly any change was seen across the evaluations, but six months after the support work the average score was slightly worse than the baseline.

The * indicates whether there were any statistically significant trends in the scores observed over the course of the project. Between baseline and the first follow-up, significant improvements were recorded for children's perceptions of support available from adults and teachers' reports of children's difficult behaviour. Comparing scores immediately following the support work with those obtained six months later, significant improvement was observed for children's mood. Finally, significant improvements were found when comparing children's baseline scores with those obtained six months later for the following measures: the child's mood, self-esteem and perception of support from adults and the teacher's report of difficult behaviour.

Table 3 provides a useful overview of the intervention's impact. However, the figures do not indicate whether the observed improvements were apparent in both formats, or whether they are accounted for by the influence of one particular

Table 3 Changes in children's behaviour and mood over the course of the project

Outcome measures	Direction of change comparing baseline scores with those obtained immediately following the support work	*Impact over time* Direction of change comparing scores immediately following the support work with those obtained six months later	Direction of change comparing baseline scores with those obtained six months after the support work finished
Child report			
Self-esteem	⇑	⇑	⇑ *
Best friendship	⇑	⇓	⇑
School friendships	⇑	⇑	⇑
Perceived support from adults	⇑ *	▭▭	⇑ *
Mood	⇓	⇑ *	⇑ *
Parent report			
Child social behaviour	⇓	⇑	⇑
Child difficult behaviour	⇓	⇑	⇓
Teacher report			
Child social behaviour	⇑	⇓	⇑
Child difficult behaviour	⇑ *	⇑	⇑ *
Child classroom competence	⇑	⇑	⇑
Number of scores indicating positive change	7	7	8

⇓ Decline in scores. ⇑ Improvement in scores. ▭▭ No change.
* Differences between mean scores are statistically significant ($p<0.05$).

support approach. This question is addressed in the next section.

Were there any differences in children's outcomes between the format types?

Despite random allocation, on seven out of the ten measures, children who participated in the groups had better average baseline scores than the children who were involved in the individual sessions (see Appendix 3, Table A3.3 for details). On three of these baseline measures differences in scores for children in the respective support formats were found to be statistically significant.

Because of a lack of equality in baseline scores for children from the two formats, scores were standardised by converting them into relative change scores. These were calculated by averaging the differences in the scores observed between each of the evaluation points. This made it possible to compare the size and direction of changes in scores for children from the two support formats. These change scores were used to assess two questions: (i) Did significant change occur during the project for children in each or either of the formats? (ii) Are there important differences in the nature of change for children when scores in each format are compared?

Table 4 depicts the direction of change in scores when compared across the different evaluation points of the project. The actual scores are reported in Appendix 4, Table A4.1.

Did significant change occur during the project within each or either of the formats?

Overall, children's behaviour and mood improved over time in both formats. The scores, represented by

Table 4 Differences in outcomes for children in the two support formats

Outcome measures	Baseline scores compared with those immediately following the support work		Scores following end of support work compared with those obtained six months later		Baseline scores compared with those obtained six months after support work finished	
	Trends for group format	Trends for individual format	Trends for group format	Trends for individual format	Trends for group format	Trends for individual format
Child report						
Self-esteem	⇑	⇑	⇑	⇑	⇑	⇑ *
Best friendship	⇑	⇑	⇓	⇑	⇑	⇑
School friendships	⇓	⇑ °	⇑	⇑	⇑	⇑ *
Perceived support from adults	⇑	⇑ *	⇓	⇑	⇑	⇑ *
Mood	⇑	⇓	⇑	⇑ *	⇑	⇑
Parent report						
Child social behaviour	⇓	⇓	⇑	⇑	⇑	⇑
Child difficult behaviour	⇓	⇓	⇓	⇑	⇓	⇑
Teacher report						
Child social behaviour	⇑ *	⇑	⇓	⇓	⇑	⇓
Child difficult behaviour	⇑	⇑	⇑	⇑	⇑	⇑ *
Child classroom competence	⇑ *	⇑	⇓	⇑	⇑	⇑

⇑ Signifies greatest improvement across formats.
* Significant difference for within format across time.
° Significant difference between individual and group format.

the arrows, show the most consistent change when baseline measures are compared with results obtained at the six-month follow-up. When these scores are compared, they indicate that children in both formats improved on nine out of the ten measures.

The * in Table 4 shows where statistically significant differences in changes across time within the respective formats were found. Children who participated in the group sessions demonstrated significant improvements in their social behaviour and classroom competence when teachers' reports at baseline were compared with those obtained immediately following the end of the support. However, children in the individual format appear to have made more sustained improvements. When their baseline scores were compared with those obtained six months after the support ended, statistically significant improvements were found for measures of self-esteem, perceived adult support and school friendships (children measures) and teachers' reports of difficult behaviour.

Were statistically meaningful differences found between the formats?

While children in both formats showed improvements, the greatest degree of change was apparent in the children who participated in the individual sessions. This is illustrated by the shaded cells in Table 4, which indicate whether change was greater for children who were involved in the group sessions or those who participated in one-to-one support.

Although trends in the scores suggest that children in the individual format demonstrated more sustained improvements compared with children who participated in the groups, only one statistically meaningful difference was found (indicated by a ° in the table). Comparing baseline measures with those obtained immediately following the support work, children in the individual format showed significant improvements in their relationships with peers at school compared with children in the group format (which is surprising considering the peer support available in the group). However, this difference was no longer significant once the background characteristics of the children, such as their parent's socio-economic status, were taken into account using an analytical technique called multiple regression. Because no real statistically meaningful differences were found, it is necessary to be cautious in drawing any conclusions about differences in the effects of the respective support formats.

Children in both formats improved on a number of measures of social, behavioural and personal competence over the course of the support work and following its completion.

Children who participated in the individual sessions appeared to make the greatest improvements. Comparing baseline scores with those obtained six months after the support work had finished, children in the individual sessions showed significant improvements on measures of self-esteem, school friendships, perceived support from adults and teachers' reports of difficult behaviour.

However, once children's background characteristics were taken into account, no significant association with format of support was found.

Similar work using a larger sample of children would be required to establish whether the support work itself and the different types of formats it utilised have a significant impact on children's well-being.

4 Did the intervention make a difference to the children's lives? Parents' and children's accounts

Immediately after the intervention ended parents were asked about children's well-being over the course of the support work. Six months later, parents were asked how their children had been since the support work had finished. Parents' responses are summarised in Table 5. Looking at all parents, they were more likely to report that the work had a positive impact when asked six months after the support finished rather than in its immediate aftermath. At six months, the majority of parents felt that their child's behaviour at home was better (56 per cent); that children spoke more

Table 5 Parents' views on how the support affected their children

Closed questions about parents' views on the impact of the support on their children	Immediately after the support work			Six months after the support had finished		
	Group (%, *n*=33)	One to one (%, *n*=24)	Total (%, *n*=57)	Group (%, *n*=35)	One to one (%, *n*=31)	Total (%, *n*=66)
Proportion of children whose behaviour at home has been:						
Much or a little easier	39	42	40	51	61	56
No change	42	33	39	20	23	21
A little or much more difficult	18	25	21	29	16	23
Proportion of children who have spoken about worries/feelings:						
Much or a little more than before	42	46	44	52	55	53
No change	52	54	53	40	39	39
A little less or less than before	6	–	4	9	6	8
Proportion of children who have talked about their other parent:						
Much or a little more than before	30	21	26	31	16	24
No change	67	71	68	49	64	56
A little less than before	3	8	5	20	19	20
Proportion of children who have talked about family things:						
Much or a little more than before	39	29	35 *	57	58	58
No change	61	71	65	37	32	35
A little less/less than before	–	–	–	6	10	7
Proportion of children who have seemed:						
Much or a little happier	39	46	42	66	65	65
No different	46	50	47	17	23	20
A little or much sadder	15	4	11	17	13	15
Proportion of children whose involvement in the work has been:						
Very useful or of some use	76	75	75	91	97	94
Not been very useful	12	8	11	–	–	–
Can't say	12	17	14	9	3	6

* Using the reduced sample of 50, children in the groups were reported to have spoken significantly more about the family than individual format children immediately following the intervention. There were no significant differences at six months.

about their worries and feelings (53 per cent) and about family things (58 per cent); and that they seemed much or a little happier (65 per cent). A resounding 94 per cent of parents felt that the support had been very useful or of some use to their children. A few differences were observed between parents of children who were involved in different types of support. Immediately following and six months after the work ended, parents of children in the group format were more likely to agree that children talked about the other parent more. For example, six months after the support work, 31 per cent of parents of children who attended groups and 16 per cent of those who attended individual sessions agreed that their children talked more about the other parent. Immediately after the support, group format children were significantly more likely to talk about family things (39 per cent group compared to 29 per cent individual format).

Aspects of life that children felt improved as a result of the intervention

While the closed questions provide a useful summary of how parents felt the support work affected their children, they paint only half the picture. To provide a more detailed account of the support work, parents and children were also asked a series of open-ended questions immediately following the end of the support work and six months after its close. There was considerable consistency in parents' and children's accounts of the impact of the support, so the results from both time periods and the views of both parents and children are reported together. Overall, parents and children felt that the intervention benefited four aspects of the children's lives, including: their emotional 'literacy' and sense of identity; how they got on with the rest of the family; their understanding and acceptance of parental separation; and their attitude towards and experience of school and peer relationships. The

findings are described in more detail below. Where relevant, findings from the closed questions as reported in Table 5 are referred to in the text.

Improvements in children's ability to express and understand their feelings

Children from both formats described themselves as more able to express their thoughts and feelings. One girl described how the support had 'let me speak and feel a bit better' (girl, age 11, individual support). Children who experienced group support were more likely to report that they had spoken to others about their feelings than children who received individual support. For both formats, family and friends were mentioned most often as confidants.

As Table 5 indicates, parents had also observed among children a greater ability and willingness to talk about their thoughts and feelings. Immediately following the end of the support work, 44 per cent of parents felt that their children were talking more about their feelings and this rose to 53 per cent when asked again six months later. In particular, children were more likely to talk about the things that worried them:

> *… moans away like a little old lady … doesn't keep things to self any more.*
> (Girl, age 9, group support)

Parents felt that children were more able to talk rather than to react to situations and more able to explain their real feelings. As one parent explained:

> *… comes out more with his true feelings … rather than being manipulative or aggressive.*
> (Boy, age 9, group support)

Issues opened up by the work for children seemed to be about school, parents' relationships and children's friendships. According to parents' accounts, when children talked about school they mentioned worries such as new teachers, being transferred to secondary school, getting on with peers and pressure from homework, discipline and

assessment. Where children mentioned the home situation they covered issues such as visiting the non-resident parent, worries about parents divorcing or remarrying, relationships between parents and relationships with the new partner and step- or half-siblings. Some children talked about falling out with friends, and fears of having no friends or not being liked by others.

Improvements in mood and behaviour

In general, parents reported that children were more settled at home and at school during and following the support work. As shown in Table 5, when asked about children's behaviour at home six months after the support, 56 per cent of parents felt that behaviour had improved, with parents of children from the individual sessions most likely to describe improvements (61 per cent at six-month follow-up).

Parents also felt that children had gained more control of their feelings and become calmer. Children were described as being less likely to lose their temper and become angry, and less likely to become violent or shout. As one parent said, their boy has 'stopped getting so aggressive when told off' (boy, age 5, group support), and another girl was described as 'not so furious or desperate as she used to be' (girl, age 6, group support). Reflecting this, some children described how they felt more in control of their feelings:

> … if someone annoys me I don't go for them any more … keep my temper … last year I made fights … this year I try to prevent them.
> (Boy, age 9, individual support)

Some children's mood and outlook also appeared to improve according to parents, particularly among children who participated in individual sessions.

> … used to get a bit low if things didn't go her way … not so much of a problem now.
> (Girl, age 8, individual support)

At the six-month follow-up, 65 per cent of children were described as much or a little happier by their parents.

Maturity

There was a feeling among parents that children developed greater independence and maturity during the support work and in the six months following its end.

> … more mature … coping better with disappointments.
> (Girl, age 10, individual support)

Changes included greater flexibility and a willingness to try new things; more able to be in their own company and requiring less comfort and proximity from a parent; able to stand up for themselves; and able to handle things on their own – asking for help only when needed.

Confidence

Both parents and children reported greater confidence and self-esteem. On occasion, children mentioned that they had learnt something about themselves and understood and liked themselves better as a result of the support. One girl described the way in which she was able to 'trust and believe more in self' (girl, age 7, individual support). Parents described children as possessing a better self-image and being kinder to themselves:

> … always used to say that didn't like herself … just lately said that she did.
> (Girl, age 10, individual support)

Parents also described the way in which children 'had found their voice' and were more confident speaking out (boy, age 10, individual support) and being more assertive (girl, age 8, group support). According to some parents, children appeared to feel more important, valued and aware that people were interested in them. In some cases, this meant that children were doing better at school and in their work:

… come on as a little person … more confidence at school. (Girl, age 6, group support)

Improvements in home life and family relationships

Parents and children observed a number of improvements in home life and family relationships. Children reported getting on better with parents and siblings, with children attending individual sessions most likely to describe improvements when asked at six months. Children also described being more able to confide in parents and feeling less frightened about how parents might respond. As one girl put it, she was surprised that her parents 'don't mind' when she tells them how she is feeling. Another boy described how he felt he was behaving better towards his mum:

… it made me behave and get on with mum better and help her. (Boy, age 9, individual support)

A number of parents mentioned that children were more relaxed and open about family issues. Although the majority of parents initially observed no change in the extent to which children talked about the family, six months later 58 per cent of parents felt children were talking a little or a lot more about such things. Parents described the types of issues children raised. For example, some children seemed more able to say what they felt about the family and how it had changed, others talked about siblings and newer family members:

… just came up in conversation that not comfortable about relationship with [step-siblings]. (Boy, age 9, individual support)

Parents also felt that children were more curious and questioning about the family and that parents' relationships with non-resident and new partners were being scrutinised. For example, one girl had been questioning parents in order 'to clarify our set-up' (girl, age 9, individual support). Another boy:

… sometimes talks to me about why I wasn't married to his dad. (Boy, age 6, individual support)

A proportion of children expressed an interest in making more contact with members of the family, such as brothers, grandparents or the relatives of the non-resident parent.

Children were also described as more respectful, considerate and sensitive towards parents. Changes in behaviour included reports of not creating problems between the resident and non-resident parent; not being as demanding; being more affectionate; and helping more around the home.

Children were conscious of being more aware and understanding of their parents' perspective:

… yes easier … lots easier … made me see I should think of mum and dad … and not hate them. (Girl, age 9, group support)

Sibling relationships

A number of parents commented on changes in sibling relationships immediately following and six months after the support. Children were described as less aggressive and more tolerant towards their brothers and sisters and more friendly and collaborative. One boy 'started saying nice things about older brother' (boy, age 9, group support); another was 'much more willing to play with brother and to help him … suddenly got close and affectionate with him' (girl, age 6, group support). Some children appeared more mature and confident in their relationships with siblings, for example, becoming more independent (boy, age 8, group support), or not deliberately aggravating them (girl, age 6, group support).

A small proportion of children were described as having become more difficult or intolerant of others, particularly their younger siblings:

… very, very difficult with little sister … more jealous, spiteful and started telling her off recently. (Girl, age 9, group support)

In some cases this was because children were 'standing up' to their siblings more as a result of new-found confidence and this was leading to greater friction: 'argues over everything with sister' (girl, age 8, individual support).

Improvements in relationships with non-resident parents

Over the course of the support work and six months after its completion, children were reported by parents to have shown changes in their attitudes towards non-resident parents or parent-figures. As shown in Table 5, at both assessment times, approximately a quarter of children were reported to have spoken more about the non-resident parent. Greater proportions of children in the groups spoke about the non-resident parent than those in individual sessions (31 per cent compared with 16 per cent at the six-month evaluation).

When children spoke about the non-resident parent, they seemed more comfortable and open, as one parent explained:

> … sat in bed talking to me happily for three hours about how things were when he was with dad … never done this before. (Boy, age 6, group support)

According to parents, some children appeared to be able to communicate with non-resident parents better, for example, being 'more honest to dad about how he feels' (boy, age 10, individual support) and being able to express their preferences when they do not want to visit.

In some cases, parents reported that children desired greater contact and communication with the non-resident parent compared with before the support work. For one child, access had been extended because she wanted to spend more time with her non-resident parent; another parent commented:

> … asked if he could call dad … never done before … more pleased to see him and more interested in him. (Boy, age 7, group support)

Improvements in children's understanding of and ability to cope with family change

A number of children reported that their understanding of family relationships and separation in general had improved as a result of the work, although group format children were most likely to mention this. In particular, children felt able to stand back and understand family life a little better, including why parents had separated and why they were unlikely to get back together.

Comments from some group format children referred to how it felt easier to cope with the home situation. Children described the way in which being in the group made it easier to think and talk about parents splitting up. Hearing about other children's experiences was also described as helpful:

> … not the only one … it happens everyday … and sometimes it's easier for your family to live alone than start fighting again. (Girl, age 10, group support)

Parents echoed these accounts. For example, some parents felt their children had become more accepting of changes in parents' relationships; as one parent explained, her daughter 'seems more relaxed about the situation…doesn't seem to bother her so much' (girl, age 10, individual support).

Parents commented that children had talked with more interest and understanding about the future of adult relationships. In particular, children seemed to have a more mature grasp of adult relationships and their complexities, understanding why they could no longer see a non-resident parent or comprehending why separation is the better option for some parents:

> … used to say that wished me and his dad were together and that things back to normal … doesn't tend to do that now … has asked if I am going to get married again. (Boy, age 6, individual support)

According to parents, some children appeared more able to cope with the stresses of contact and separation as a result of the support work. For example, children were described as more able to

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cope when visits with the non-resident parent ended or when parents met up. Children were also described as less likely to play parents off against one another.

Improved understanding of other people's family situations and feelings

Parents with children in both the group and individual sessions felt that involvement in the support work helped children to be more empathic and understanding of other people's circumstances. For example, parents felt that some children were comforted by the fact that other children were in similar situations, and sympathetic towards them: 'there were other people like them' (boy, age 7, group support). For some children, the insight into other children's experiences helped them to develop a more general awareness of people's private lives and feelings.

Improvements in school life and friendships

Both parents and teachers reported improvements in children's attitude to school. Children were described as being more sure of their schoolwork (girl, age 10, individual support); able to concentrate for longer; more positive about attending; and generally more settled there. As one parent explained:

> … asking more questions at school … a lot better about school in the last term.
> (Girl, age 9, group support)

Children's accounts reflected those of parents and teachers and children from both formats felt that aspects of school seemed easier after the work. Sometimes children felt that their schoolwork had benefited. For example, one girl was getting on with her work faster; another was reading more. In other cases, it was changes in their feelings or behaviour that helped:

> … don't cry so much … like coming to school.
> (Girl, age 6, group support)

> … because in a group I haven't been so angry at school. (Girl, age 11, group support)

Improvements in relationships with peers and others

A number of children reported that making and managing friendships had become easier as a result of their involvement in the support work. For example, children found it easier to talk and play with friends, socialise with others and make new friends outside of school.

Some of the comments from the group format children highlighted the value of peer support in helping them to feel less isolated by their experience and more able to make friends:

> … feel better about making friends … as I have got [child in group] … he is such a good friend.
> (Girl, age 8, group support)

Parents also noticed improvements in children's relationships with their peers during and following the support work. Children were described as more sociable, more likely to feel accepted, more able to make friends and involved in a wider social circle. This was the case both at school and outside of school. As one parent described:

> … new friends at youth club he has joined … plays with friends in the neighbourhood.
> (Boy, age 10, group support)

A number of parents also felt that children were getting on better with other adults. For example, one parent described how her son no longer 'played the clown all the time' and was more able to sit and talk with people (boy, age 8, group support). Other children were described as more willing to try things (boy, age 9, group support) and more willing to mix with people (boy, age 6, group support):

> … neighbour has given reports of her being the 'life and soul of the party' at Brownies … a lot happier than used to be.
> (Girl, age 8, individual support)

Did the intervention have any negative consequences for the children or their families?

For a few children, things seemed harder following their involvement in the support. The types of things children found harder varied. Some children were troubled about missing aspects of schoolwork while others felt that their involvement in the intervention had caused problems with friends. The need to keep the contents of the work confidential created difficulties in their everyday dealings with children outside the project. As one girl explained, it is 'hard to keep secrets' with friends (girl, age 8, group support).

Not all parents felt that children's behaviour or outlook had improved as a result of the work. Around 20 per cent of parents felt that their child's behaviour had become a little or more difficult during and after the intervention. At the six-month follow-up, parents of children in the group format were more likely to say that behaviour had deteriorated (29 per cent) compared with parents whose children attended individual sessions (16 per cent). Some parents felt that their children had displayed more anger since their involvement in the support work. A few children were reported as being more argumentative, aggressive and difficult to handle (boy, age 11, individual support), 'disobedient and stubborn', refusing to be told what to do (boy, age 6, group support), or generally disrespectful (girl, age 8, individual support):

> … developed an attitude and has been disrespectful at school … wants to express herself more and to be more assertive but not always sure how.
> (Girl, age 8, individual support)

Difficulties were described in children's relationships with adults at home and school. For example, one girl was described as testing teachers and adults as if she wanted to 'know what punishment is about' (girl, age 9, individual support); another child was described as rude to visitors and friends. For a small proportion of children, difficulties in their relationships with the non-resident parent or parent-figure became more apparent during the project. Tensions emerged in different ways: some children withdrew a little or became more challenging; others were reluctant or unhappy to see the non-resident parent; some played up on visits. As one parent explained:

> … dad mentioned that she had been 'pushing it' with him recently … he doesn't normally mention these things. (Girl, age 9, group support)

As reported earlier, both parents and children commented on children's improvements in confidence and sense of self. Some parents believed that displays of difficult behaviour were due to children struggling to cope with and express this new self-awareness, although other parents were more sceptical.

In contrast with the children who responded to the work by becoming more difficult, some parents felt that children had become more demonstrative and emotional. For example, parents felt children were seeking more physical contact and comforting: 'wanting kisses and cuddles' (girl, age 10, individual support); needing sitting with at bedtime (boy, age 6, individual support), or generally requiring more attention. A few parents felt that the sessions had 'stirred things up' for children because they had 're-opened old wounds' or released difficult feelings. Some children were described as quite unsettled, either during the course of the work or once it ended, while other children were described as more tearful and anxious or generally more up and down in mood:

> … at the time it was happening it was a positive thing for him to be talking about his dad and having someone there … he seemed to enjoy it, but it may have opened up wounds that he wasn't able to cope with when it ended. (Boy, age 7, individual support)

… gradually relaxed after the sessions … had been very tense during the work … had cried a lot … never had before … had lost his expressiveness in writing but now has written his first book.
(Boy, age 6, group support)

Some parents also felt that children's confidence or self-esteem had diminished following the intervention. For example, a few parents reported that their children had become more withdrawn, got easily upset if challenged, required regular reinforcement and generally had poorer self-esteem in the school environment.

The counsellors felt that rather than 'stir things up' the sessions opened up underlying issues. They suggested that parents could benefit from being warned that support work might release some troubling feelings or disruptive behaviours. The counsellors also suggested that children who respond in this way could benefit from longer term support through additional sessions.

Children's responses to closed questions about the impact of the intervention on different aspects of their lives

Children were asked a series of closed questions about the intervention in addition to the open questions reported above. Table 6 summarises children's responses to these closed questions and provides a useful overview of how children felt the support work influenced their lives. On the whole, children were very positive about their involvement when asked immediately after the support ended. The majority of children felt that the intervention helped them to sort a few or lots of things out (79 per cent); was very helpful (53 per cent); and made them feel better (68 per cent). Children who participated in the group support were slightly more positive about its benefits compared with children who were involved in individual sessions. In particular, when statistical differences were compared using the reduced sample of 50 children, those in the groups were significantly more likely to say they found the work very helpful (68 per cent in the groups compared with 33 per cent in the individual format).

Table 6 Children's accounts of the impact of the support work on their lives when asked immediately after its end

	Group format (%, *n*=33)	Individual format (%, *n*=24)	All children (%, *n*=57)
Proportion of children who felt the work had:			
Sorted out a few or lots of things for them	85	71	79
Not sorted anything out for them	15	29	21
Proportion of children who found the work:			
Very helpful	64 *	38 *	53
A little helpful	33	58	44
Not very helpful	3	4	3
Proportion of children who said the work made them feel:			
Better	70	67	68
No different	24	33	28
Worse	6	–	4

* A statistically significant difference in format response was found when the sample of 50 was used in the analysis.

Did children's views about the impact of the intervention vary according to the type of support they received?

Rough counts of children's responses to open questions about how they felt the intervention affected them were calculated. Some of these are reported in Table 7. Taken together with the response to the closed questions reported in Table 6, children who were involved in the group support appeared to be more positive about its impact than children who participated in individual sessions. In general, the differences are small and should be treated cautiously in view of the differences in baseline measures and socio-demographic background that have been observed (see Chapters 2 and Appendix 3). However, the findings are noteworthy in view of the results reported in Chapter 3 that children who participated in the individual sessions appeared to have done better according to measures completed by parents and teachers. While overall, more children who participated in the group work were positive about the intervention and its impact on their lives, children who received individual support seemed to have fared slightly better according to the psychometric measures used.

Table 7 Counts for children's views on the impact of the intervention in response to open questions

Proportion of children who felt they had:	Percentages based on rough counts of children's responses to open questions obtained immediately following the support work			Percentages based on rough counts of children's responses to open questions obtained six months after the support work ended		
	Group %	Individual %	Total %	Group %	Individual %	Total %
Learnt something	55	61	58	–	–	–
Understood things better	58	42	51	65	52	59
Found things easier	50	29	41	68	42	56
Found things harder	10	6	9	8	10	9
Felt they had changed in some way	18	6	13	14	23	18

The majority of children were positive about the project and its impact on their lives. Most children agreed that the project helped them to sort things out, was helpful and made them feel better.

Parents and children reported improvements in four aspects of children's lives: emotional competence and sense of self; getting on with other members of the family; understanding and accepting parental separation; and their experience of and attitude towards peers and school.

Not all parents observed changes for the better. Some parents felt children were unsettled by the work and more emotional and needy, while other parents thought their children had responded by becoming more angry and difficult.

In a few cases, parents felt that children's self-confidence and ability to get on with others had deteriorated.

Although children who took part in the groups were generally more positive about the support, children in the individual format showed the greatest improvements according to the psychometric measures reported in Chapter 3.

5 What did parents and children think about the support work?

This chapter focuses on children's experiences of the support work as opposed to whether they felt it made a difference to their lives. Children were asked a number of questions about how they found the intervention, the answers to which are presented in Table 8. Children were positive about the support. As the table shows, the majority of children liked the work (95 per cent), found it very or a little helpful (97 per cent) and would like to do similar work again (77 per cent). More children who participated in the group format than individual sessions liked the work a lot (76 per cent compared with 71 per cent) and said they would like to do more work in the future (82 per cent compared with 71 per cent), but the differences were not large.

What did children like about the support work?

Fourteen per cent of the children who were interviewed were able to elaborate on aspects of the work they enjoyed when asked to talk about the responses they gave to the closed question. Most children particularly liked practical aspects of the work such as drawing, making things and the games. Children in the group format described how they appreciated the chance to share, to hear about other children's experiences and to get positive feedback from their peers: 'good to share private things' (girl, age 8, group support).

Children who participated in the individual sessions talked about how they appreciated the chance to talk to someone about their experiences and about things they could not discuss elsewhere. One girl commented on how she valued 'talking to someone who understands' (girl, age 10, individual support); another girl how she 'liked to draw about feelings' (girl, age 10, individual support).

More than half of the parents interviewed immediately following the end of the support work felt that children had been positive about their involvement. Children in both formats had told parents how much they enjoyed the work, looked forward to the sessions and were reluctant to miss them, even when they were ill or had to miss an activity they enjoyed.

Table 8 Children's experience of the intervention when asked immediately after it finished

	Group format (%, *n*=33)	Individual format (%, *n*=24)	All children (%, *n*=57)
Proportion of children who:			
Like the work a lot	76	71	74
Liked the work a bit	18	25	21
Didn't like the work	6	4	5
Proportion of children who found the work:			
Very helpful	64 *	38 *	53
A little helpful	33	58	44
Not very helpful	3	4	3
Proportion of children who would:			
Like to do more of the work again	82	71	77
Don't know if they'd like any more	6	25	14
Would not like to do any more	12	4	9

* Statistically significant difference in format response when sample of 50 used in the analysis.

Approximately a third of the children mentioned to parents when the work was coming to a close, 30 per cent of whom described their disappointment at its ending and a desire for more work:

> … wished there were more … she said sometimes that it had been upsetting and wished it had gone on longer. (Girl, age 9, group support)

Other children either did not mind or were quite happy that the support was ending.

What aspects of the support work were helpful?

Ninety-seven per cent of children found the work either very or a little bit helpful. Perhaps not surprisingly, those aspects of the work that children liked were also those that they found helpful.

Group format
Children in the group format described the enjoyment and support they derived from being with others, getting feedback from peers and hearing about their problems. For example, one girl 'liked sharing problems with rest of the group' (girl, age 8, group support), another girl found it helpful to see that she was 'not alone … now realise not the only one who feels the same' (girl, age 10, group support).

Parents felt that children derived genuine support from being in a group. Benefits included children feeling special in belonging to the group, finding it helpful to talk to the others and being encouraged by hearing about others' situations. For example, one parent described how reassuring it was for their child to 'know "others in the same boat" as this might encourage them to obtain more help if they needed it' (boy, age 8, group support). Another parent felt that it was helpful for the child to be with other 'children he felt he could relate to' (boy, age 9, group support).

Hearing about other people's situations helped children to gain a sense of perspective on their own lives, according to parents' accounts. For example, children understood that they were not the only ones dealing with difficult situations; not seeing their fathers; and that 'nothing [is] perfect' (girl, age 10, group support). As one parent explained:

> … with the group he has seen that it's not just me and him that have gone through conflict … he is more accepting of his and my situation.
> (Boy, age 8, group support)

In a few cases, parents felt that their children struggled with the group format, either because the child's character was more suited to a one-to-one setting or because of difficulties with the behaviour of other children in the group.

Individual format
Parents of children who participated in one-to-one sessions felt that children benefited from the experience of talking to someone. They appreciated being listened to and having a place to express their feelings and having someone to talk to outside of the family: 'he felt special … nice for him to have someone listening to him … talking to him' (boy, age 9, individual support). Among the particular benefits described by parents with regard to the individual format were that children were helped to put things into perspective, and that they learnt the value of talking about their feelings and the value of being understood:

> … it was a help at the time … he said that he had talked to people on the project about [contact issue] … how it had made him angry and upset … they had understood. (Boy, age 7, individual support)

> … looked forward to her sessions … treated it as very private … something for herself.
> (Girl, age 7, individual support)

Although children who participated in the individual sessions did not have the obvious peer

support available to the group format children, they appeared to derive benefit from the knowledge that others around them were also involved in the work. Parents observed that children found it helpful to talk to others on the project:

> … *talked to* [a child in same class] *who did it.* (Girl, age 7, individual support)

What did children find difficult or dislike about the support work?

Although the majority of children made positive comments when asked what they thought of the work, other children qualified their comments. For example, one girl disliked the drawing activities and having to show her work to others; a few children described how they found it difficult to talk about some of the personal issues in their lives: 'don't really like talking … intimate bits' (girl, age 10, individual support); a couple of children found aspects of the work a little confusing or upsetting:

> … *fun, joyful, a bit confusing … didn't know what she meant sometimes.* (Boy, age 6, individual support)

Very negative comments were rare, and more likely to be made by children who attended individual sessions. Some of the comments indicated that they were disappointed in the work because it was not as helpful as they had anticipated or that it touched on some difficult feelings for them:

> … *didn't like it, got upset, felt this way when went back into class.* (Girl, age 7, individual support)

For a few children who participated in the group work, discomfort arose from the behaviour of others in the sessions. For example, one girl was unhappy when another member of the group 'messed around' (girl, age 8, group support) and another when a group member was 'being silly and rude' (girl, age 10, group support).

Echoing children's accounts, not all parents felt that their children had been positive about the work. Using rough counts of parents' responses to the open questions suggests that approximately two out of ten children were reported by their parents to have shown mixed or negative responses. Some children had mentioned to parents that the work was 'difficult, boring or made them sad'. Other children were dismissive of the work or said they wished they had not taken part.

Parents felt that some individual format children with siblings in the group format were disappointed by comparisons with brothers' and sisters' experiences. For example, one girl was confused by her brother's description of the group work as fun, when her experience of the one-to-one sessions was more serious. A couple of children were disappointed that their one-to-one support did not contain as many sessions as the group work.

The reasons parents gave to explain children's unhappiness with the work varied. For example, one girl was disappointed that the sessions had not answered the questions she had because 'she was looking for more explanation about the situation' (girl, age 8, group support); others were left feeling uncomfortable by some of the exercises or were bored talking about the issue.

How did children feel about school as a setting for the work?

At least seven out of ten children had no problems leaving class or missing schoolwork to take part in the sessions. Where children did experience difficulties, these focused on anxiety about schoolwork. Some were unhappy about missing particular lessons that they did not get the chance to make up, especially as sessions were at the same time each week. Others were unhappy about being obliged to make up for work that they missed. As one boy commented:

… really sad … had to stay in and finish it at break.
(Boy, age 9, individual support)

A few children found going back into class a problem, either because of the physical experience of walking back in or because of what they had missed during the session.

How did doing the support work make the children feel?

Perhaps not surprisingly, just under a third of children going to group sessions reported feeling nervous, shy, worried or frightened at the beginning of the work. Over twice as many children in the groups felt this way compared with children who attended individual sessions. For the group format children, these feelings were probably associated with being placed in a group situation with children not normally in their class. The counsellors reported that it was not uncommon for children in either format to be unclear about the purpose and format of the work when they attended the first session (despite researchers having met with the children individually to explain the work). However, once children had attended a few sessions they described how they felt better. As one child explained: 'happier after relieving feelings deep inside' (girl, age10, group support).

What did children think about confidentiality?

Practitioners discussed the issue of confidentiality with children in each format. Children were encouraged to talk to parents and special friends about the issues covered in the support work. However, children in the group format were asked not to talk about what other members of the group had said. Children responded well to the offer of confidentiality. Neither the counsellors nor teachers were aware of children talking to others about the work. The counsellors, in particular, felt that the children showed a seriousness and sensitivity on this issue. According to parents, although most children talked to some extent about the support work, they talked mostly about practical aspects of the intervention. In fact, some parents felt that children made it clear that they could not talk about the sessions in detail because they had agreed to observe confidentiality. As one parent described, her son 'saw it as his responsibility to keep silent on some topics' (boy, age 8, group support). Another child spoke briefly about the intervention, but again reiterated the contract of confidentiality that had been made: 'said "that is private … secret between me and them"' (boy, age 9, individual support). Some children felt that keeping confidentiality had created problems with friends. In many ways children were quite reluctant to talk about the work with others outside the support and this may have been a lost opportunity for them to benefit from additional discussion with and help from others. Overall, some children seemed to have misunderstood the meaning of confidentiality and, despite encouragement to talk about their own feelings, had believed they should not talk about any aspects of the work.

Would children like to be involved in similar work in the future?

As Table 8 illustrates, over three-quarters of the children would like to be involved in some type of support work again. Group format children were the most positive six months after the support work ended. Those who participated in the group work highlighted the fun aspect of their involvement. A reason consistently given for wanting to be involved in further work was that it helped them to talk about and sort out their feelings. They mentioned the value of understanding more and being understood:

… yes … like to have more … most of the time I wish I could talk to someone who understands my feelings. (Girl, age 9, individual support)

Children also mentioned the way the support helped them to feel better about their family situation and to handle their feelings better.

Some children felt that they had specific problems that they would like help with through more involvement with the support work: as one girl put it, there is 'all this stuff in my head' (girl, age 9, group support). Other children preferred not to do any more of the work as they had found it hard or upsetting:

… got a bit upset … gets a little boring after a bit … talking about it. (Girl, age 10, individual support)

Would children encourage others to become involved in the work?

The majority of the sample (almost seven out of ten) said that they would encourage a friend to get involved in the support work. Group format children were more likely to say they would recommend it to a friend than individual format children. One of the reasons given for recommending the work was the opportunity to enhance their understanding and express their feelings. As one girl explained:

… [it] gets feelings out of your head.
(Girl, age10, group support)

One of the suggestions children made when asked to identify how the work could be improved was that the work should be more widely known about and more children should be encouraged to get involved.

The children who mentioned that they would not recommend it to a friend did not always explain why they reached that conclusion. Some mentioned that they felt it was 'boring' or that 'shouldn't bother as get asked a load of questions'. Others were quite specific about who might benefit

from the work, such as younger children or those with the 'right problems' (boy, age 9, individual support).

Did children and parents think the support could be improved?

Children were asked to comment on ways that the work could be improved. Children in the group format requested longer sessions so that they would be able to fit everything in. Sometimes the sessions had seemed too much of a rush and they wanted more time to discuss things and to be together:

… extend the time … all afternoon would be good.
(Boy, age 8, group support)

Children in the individual support format asked for more rather than longer sessions. Some would have appreciated more long-term involvement.

Parents mentioned that they would have appreciated more knowledge about the format of the work, for example more detailed information on which topics were to be covered week by week. Supplied with this information, parents felt they could have been more aware of what was happening for their child, more able to respond to things that came up and more able to provide reassurance where needed. Because of a lack of information, some parents felt excluded from the process and unable to help their children:

… like to know more about what was involved at the time and therefore what areas were having an impact on him … felt shut out of the experience the child was having … one idea could be a leaflet on the sessions and what was being done when … need more preparation on what to expect.
(Boy, age 6, group support)

… nice to know more about what they were doing … to know more about the process … how could help … felt excluded … taken too far that it was kept for the child … idea would be to have a little bit of work

for child to take home, like a work book … something more practical for the parents to do.
(Girl, age 6, group support)

Some parents said that they would have liked a chance to talk to the people who were running the support sessions. For some parents, it would have been helpful to have an introductory session with a practitioner to talk about the family and to obtain advice on how to handle family issues or those that emerged in the course of the support. Other parents commented that they would have valued some form of feedback about how the work was progressing, while protecting the children's need for confidentiality:

… felt work was okay but need to feel that would get feedback on what was upsetting a child.
(Girl, age 8, individual support)

Most children were positive about their involvement in the support work and were keen to be involved in similar work in the future.

Children reported feeling better following their involvement and valued expressing their thoughts and feelings, being listened to and hearing about the experiences of others. However, some children reported feeling uncomfortable talking about their personal experiences and feelings.

Most children were happy that the support was provided in the school setting and valued meeting peers who shared similar experiences. For a few children, however, missing schoolwork and returning to the classroom were difficult.

The majority of parents thought children found the work a positive experience and derived particular benefit from the support of the group or the individual attentions of a counsellor. However, some parents felt their children were less enthusiastic because they found the work disappointing, boring or troubling.

From their own perspective, some parents felt they would have been in a better position to support children if they had been given either more information about the project, or the opportunity to talk to the counsellors and obtain feedback, or both.

6 What did teachers and head teachers think about the support?

Teachers' accounts of how the support work affected life in their classrooms

Teachers were asked to provide written responses to a series of open questions about their experience of the support work and its impact on the classroom. Thirty-nine teachers commented on the 69 children immediately after support work had been completed and in most cases they reported no interference with classroom activities or schooling (70 per cent) and no problems with children leaving for and returning from the sessions (90 per cent).

Teachers also mentioned how much some children enjoyed going and how positive they were about their weekly involvement. Children were said to have looked forward to their sessions and to have been visibly happy, relaxed, confident, calmer or more talkative on return to class:

> *… always reminding me when to go so must have been helpful.* (Girl, age 9, group support)

> *… enjoyed group … called it 'secret club'.*
> (Boy, age 7, group support)

Teachers also commented that some children were pleased to be selected and felt special being involved. This situation did not alter as the weeks went by.

A few children, one in ten, were reported by teachers to be more unsettled when they returned to class after their sessions. For example, they would be excited, make noisy entrances, disrupt the class and need subduing on their return. There were also comments about anxiety before sessions and quietness on return to class. In a few cases, teachers had reservations about how helpful or appropriate the work had been for a particular child:

> *… seemed to have less effect than for other children … didn't make much of it.*
> (Girl, age 9, individual support)

In the majority of cases (more than 80 per cent), teachers reported that they did not have to make any rearrangements to accommodate the sessions. Where problems were specifically mentioned teachers felt that they had not had enough communication about when the children were to do the sessions and, from time to time, some confusion occurred at registration times. In one school this was due to a change in administrative staff. Teachers were more likely to say that the group support caused some disruption to classroom activities. This may have been because there were almost twice as many group sessions compared with individual ones and because there were more children leaving class to take part. In a few cases difficulties were associated with children bringing objects back into class (jars, chocolate) that they had been given in the group. Teachers recommended that more care be taken as to when these were given out.

The importance of good communication between themselves and project staff was mentioned by some teachers who saw it as a vital means of avoiding confusion and enhancing the support available to children. Some teachers felt unclear about what the children were experiencing but felt unable to discuss it with the children for fear of breaching confidentiality. Another teacher commented:

> *… it would have been a great plus point if could have compared notes with session runner weekly … we may have been able to enlighten each other and thereby aid the child more.*

The feedback head teachers received from staff reiterated comments made by teachers directly to the project workers. Head teachers found staff positive about the work and about the idea of future support being offered in schools. Some teachers, however, preferred a lunchtime setting for the work to prevent children from missing too much of any one subject.

Head teachers' impressions of how the children and their families reacted to the intervention

The researchers met with head teachers just after the school's involvement with the support work and then again approximately six months after the support finished. Immediately after the support ended, all the head teachers were positive about its impact and felt children were more confident, calmer and better behaved following the work. In a few cases, heads felt that things had not changed as a result of the intervention. Indeed, a few children seemed to become more emotionally fragile in the days following the sessions, and one child appeared to have become more difficult.

Impressions voiced at the six-month follow-up again mentioned more confidence, maturity, better behaviour and improved mood in some children. For other children the long-term picture appeared less positive, with children becoming more erratic in their moods and behaviour. In several cases this was associated with increased concern from the schools about current home situations rather than the effects of the intervention.

Staff had certainly been aware of a need for support for some children and had hoped more families would have got involved. They felt that some children were attention-starved and had few opportunities to talk to adults. Teachers felt they were becoming too busy to provide children with the space for the 'emotional talk' that they needed and the intervention could have provided an important outlet. As one head teacher put it:

> *… the kids need more than school can give.*

Head teachers felt that support delivered in schools makes it easier for families to participate compared with more remote or unfamiliar locations. For example, head teachers suggested that a school is easily accessible by different forms of transport and the routine of the school is already familiar to parents so they would be more likely to accommodate involvement in support work into their daily life. However, in their experience heads felt that parents would not necessarily take up offers of help at school or at any other location. Previously, some schools had offered extra services, but they had not reached as many families as hoped. Where success was reported the approach to families had been through familiar liaison staff and highly targeted, with, for example, offers of crèche facilities. One suggestion was that family change was so common in communities that it was no longer seen as an issue requiring intervention.

Additional benefits of the intervention observed by head teachers

Head teachers described some additional benefits arising from the intervention. For example, one head teacher observed a greater willingness among staff to adopt counselling support in the school. In another school, children seemed more open to teachers and so staff felt better placed to observe when children were experiencing difficulties. Another head teacher reported improved communication between parents and staff as five parents had made contact with the school to talk about personal issues with the head.

Others also commented that they felt that the intervention raised awareness of services available for people going through separation or divorce. One school had passed on details of support to two other parents since the support ended and another head teacher had asked for information about the Children's Service at the local Family Mediation Service.

(See box overleaf)

Teachers and head teachers were supportive of the intervention and, on the whole, did not find it disruptive of school life.

School personnel felt that most children benefited from their involvement in the work, although they felt that a few children had not taken to the support and were unsettled by their experience.

Teachers were pleased and relieved that children were given the space and attention needed to help them talk about their troubles and feelings.

Head teachers were keen to see ongoing support around a range of issues available to families and staff in the school setting, although they recognised this was not possible due to lack of funding.

7   What did the counsellors think about the intervention?

Was the support offered appropriate?

The two counsellors involved in the project felt that the work was valuable. They suggested that the children in the groups found the work fun and benefited from being with their peers, hearing that their feelings were shared by others, and hearing how others coped with similar situations.

Practitioners believed that children who were seen individually also found the experience positive. One child said to the counsellor:

> It's been good talking to you, it helped clear my head.
> (Girl, age 10, individual support)

Children seemed to experience the individual work as a more intense, serious business and this left some of them feeling more isolated than group format children. Some children seen individually, but who were aware that others were being seen in a group, expressed a preference for being in the group.

> … talked to two others doing the work … would rather have done a group.
> (Boy, age 7, individual support)

Both the researchers and counsellors observed that children were often able to discuss matters more openly than many people (parents, teachers, other professionals) assume. They showed examples of understanding quite difficult, abstract concepts, finding ways to say how they felt and passing on information to others. One example was a nine-year-old girl who was experiencing conflict between her parents whenever they got in touch. Following a group session on parental conflict, she raised the subject with both parents separately when they next argued on the telephone. Rather than talk about her feelings directly, she mentioned how difficult it was for children when parents were still in conflict after they separated. Enough of a seed was planted for both parents to recognise the problem and to agree to be more civil to each other in front of the children.

What did the counsellors think about the group versus individual approach?

The counsellors were aware of strengths and weaknesses with each approach. The counsellors and their co-workers commented on how groups developed a strong identity and became places where children could explore their feelings and fears.

The counsellors felt that the practice of random allocation to the respective interventions, required for research purposes, posed some problems. They recognised that some of the children in a group setting would have been better suited to individual support and vice versa. Consequently they felt that allocation to a particular type of intervention should be based on the particular need of each child. The counsellors felt that individual support may be more therapeutic for children who: have experienced a very traumatic or markedly different parental separation; have experienced a recent or significant bereavement; were exposed to domestic violence or an abusive situation; or were suffering from depression.

The counsellors also felt that some practical problems emerged because groups included children of a wide developmental range. There were examples of younger children playing up and more mature children feeling left out. Although the counsellors felt there were advantages and disadvantages attached to having a diverse group of children, on balance it was felt that it is more difficult to work with a group of primary school age children when more than two years separate the oldest from the youngest or where there are differences in conceptual understanding, attention span and life experience.

One school participating in the project expressed a wish for work with a group of four to five year olds. Although this was a younger age group than originally intended, the counsellors ran a modified group model. Four shorter sessions

were offered, although children's positive response to the work suggests seven sessions would have been appropriate. According to the counsellors, young children engaged well with the support and were able to express thoughts and feelings about parental separation vividly. For example, in the first session, one four-year-old girl responded to the introduction that everyone in the group had one thing in common – that their mums and dads did not live together – with the statement:

> *… when my dad left, we all cried.*
> (Girl, age 4, group support)

After the third session the counsellor noted:

> *They are remarkably open about their feelings; it is certainly worthwhile working in this way with this age group, but the activities need to be tailored to their abilities and concentration span.*

The counsellors felt four participants was the optimum number for groups of younger children (lower infant age). Groups for older children, on the other hand, could consist of up to eight children as a larger group provides a greater variety of family situations and potential for discussion. It was questioned whether siblings, cousins or children whose families are enmeshed or live in close proximity to each other should be put in the same group.

The counsellors commented that it was more difficult to stimulate discussions with children in the project's individual sessions compared with individual sessions that have been run at their specialist centre. The practitioners attributed this to the fact that children participating in the intervention had not been referred by parents because of any particular concerns and because the counsellors had only a brief outline of the children's personal situations. This situation could be improved by arranging interviews with children and parents before the work commenced.

Is school a suitable setting for this kind of support?

The counsellors found that working in the school environment required a degree of flexibility about which format to adopt. The number of children available to participate in the work is likely to dictate whether a group or individual format is offered. The counsellors felt that it was unrealistic to run a group where there were fewer than four children and individual support may be more appropriate in such cases.

The project counsellors felt it was important before any individual or group support work commenced to have an agreement with the school that a suitable room was made available for the work. A room needed to be an appropriate size for the group and free of too many distractions. Ideally, the counsellors felt that children's anxieties would be minimised if the work took place in the same room and at the same time each week. A problem with this approach, however, is that children can miss a sizeable amount of schoolwork, usually the same subject. School staff and parents felt it might be better to vary the timing of sessions if the work is held in classroom time.

Practitioners highlighted the importance of building good relationships with the head and staff if they are to be supportive of an intervention. The project staff found that gaining support took a considerable amount of time and involved understanding the school culture and values; explaining the aims of the support clearly; clarifying what was expected of school staff; and exploring how the support could be accommodated most easily into the life of the school. While schools valued the offer of support around parental separation (which was the brief of this project), counsellors were also aware that schools had many diverse needs. Schools expressed a need for and would welcome support available for children who had experienced bereavement or other forms of loss or change.

Counsellors were largely supportive of this type of work and had observed benefits for children who participated in the groups and individual sessions.

The counsellors who ran the support found school an acceptable setting in which to offer support when compared with running sessions at their specialist centre.

Excellent communication with schools and the need for flexibility in the structure and make-up of support were noted by the counsellors as crucial to the smooth running of the work.

8 Issues around implementing school-based support

Setting up and running the intervention raised a number of issues about implementing support in a school setting. Some of these issues are discussed briefly in this chapter.

Obtaining parental consent

In compliance with ethics approval the project initially sought consent for the child's involvement from both resident and non-resident parents, where non-resident parents were said to have any form of contact with a child. This proved to be problematic. First, it was difficult to quantify what was considered actual contact with the non-resident parent. Second, resident parents did not always understand why it was necessary to seek the sanction of a non-resident parent where he or she did not otherwise play a part in day-to-day decision making. Finally, resident parents did not always feel confident that non-resident parents would appreciate a child's need for extra support.

Following further consultation with researchers and practitioners in the field, a revised consent protocol was devised and approved by the local ethics committee. In addition to the resident parent's consent, that of the non-resident parent was sought, or as a minimum their acquiescence obtained where a regular level of contact existed. The decision to obtain the non-resident parent's consent was made by the researcher following an initial conversation with a resident parent and on the basis of the following guidelines:

- Where a non-resident parent had effectively ceased contact and played no part in a child's welfare it was considered inappropriate to actively seek consent from him or her.

- Where supervised contact was in place or domestic violence was apparent cases were considered individually.

- Where parents were divided on a child's participation they were not included to avoid putting extra strain on the child.

Child protection issues in a school setting

At the beginning of the project, head teachers expressed concern about how child protection issues would be handled. Project staff devised guidelines to be followed in cases where there were concerns about a child's welfare. The guidelines were as follows:

- Before leaving school premises project staff will inform the school's designated child protection officer. Where this person is unavailable they will inform the head teacher.

- Within 24 hours, they will inform the Children's Service practice supervisor (at the counsellor's centre).

- The school will then follow its own child protection procedure, including any necessary emergency action.

Participant confidentiality

Confidentiality is an important and complex issue and one mentioned by all the different types of project participants. While confidentiality was seen as important by the respondents and valued by the children, it also posed a number of difficulties (see Chapter 5). Some parents felt excluded from what was happening because their children did not talk about the support work. Teachers were wary of asking children about their experience of the intervention for fear of breaching confidentiality and because children rarely spoke about the support. Similarly, the need to observe confidentiality constrained the opportunity to share

information between the teachers and counsellors (see Chapter 6).

Although confidentiality was important to the children and something that they valued, especially in the groups, some children reported difficulties in their friendships with those who did not participate in the support because they felt unable to share their experiences. Despite encouragement from the counsellors to talk to parents or a special friend about the support work, children seemed unable or unwilling to talk about their experiences with those outside of the intervention. This might be because they did not understand that the confidentiality boundary was intended to discourage them from repeating what other members of the group had said or because they preferred not to discuss the work with others. Overall, it appears that the confidentiality agreement prevented certain children from discussing appropriate issues with their families, friends or teachers. Other researchers have also found that observing practitioner–child confidentiality has created some barriers and difficulties with parents (McConnell and Sims, 1999). In future, it may be necessary to investigate ways of helping children to understand the subtleties of confidentiality in support work.

The value of flexibility and involving parents

Parents, head teachers and counsellors suggested that future support, outside the constraints of a research project, will be more likely to meet all the participants' needs if there is greater flexibility in the structure. For example, counsellors, teachers and parents observed that some children did not cope so well with the group setting and would have benefited from a move to individual sessions. Similarly, some groups did not gel and practitioners commented that greater flexibility would have enabled them to devise alternatives or move children into a different setting. Head teachers also felt it would be sensible to have a

flexible approach to the support. They suggested that group work would be a good 'warm up' and a way of getting children to trust a new person before doing individual work with them. Following the more relaxed setting of the group, children could be given the opportunity to discuss specific issues in a one-to-one setting.

Some parents expressed an interest in the provision of family sessions, either for parent and child, or for siblings. Head teachers also felt that it would be useful to develop a parent aspect to the work as in many cases parents seemed to be in need of or asked for support for themselves. School heads observed that parents could benefit from having someone they see for support in the school setting (even just an initial meeting) as this might provide a non-threatening gateway to further support or advice.

Some parents and head teachers suggested that the group work might be run with children who had special needs, including language-processing difficulties. The counsellors' reports of the success of the pilot group with four to five year olds also points to the value of exploring the value of working with younger children.

Research investigating similar types of support (McConnell and Sims, 1999) has also found that the work is likely to be most successful where it allows for a degree of flexibility and where joint sessions with parents are offered if appropriate.

As reported in Chapter 4, some parents felt that their children's behaviour or emotional well-being deteriorated during or following the intervention. Practitioners pointed out that it would be helpful to forewarn parents that this might happen and to reassure them that this is part of the process of working through responses to the separation. It was also suggested by practitioners that some of these children will require additional sessions and that programmes need to be sufficiently flexible to provide further support.

Setting realistic expectations

Recent research (such as Rodgers and Pryor, 1998) has emphasised the importance of conceptualising separation and divorce as a process rather than a one-off event. How children respond to this process is likely to vary depending on their pre-separation experiences and post-separation circumstances. Well-timed support may give children the tools they need to cope with the ongoing process. However, it is also the case that children will encounter new circumstances, such as the formation of a step-family, and they may require specific support to cope with these events in addition to the more generic support offered by the intervention.

The importance of communication

Communicating with children about what to expect

The counsellors commented on how frequently children were unclear about the purpose of the work when they arrived for the first session. This was despite children having discussed the work with the researcher before its start and parents having been encouraged to talk about the work with their children. Future support is likely to benefit from developing effective ways of helping children to digest information about the work and to discuss what is on offer before they attend sessions.

Informing parents about the content of the work

Chapter 5 described how parents expressed a desire for more information about the content of the work and its possible impact. Some parents felt excluded from the support process because they were not provided with detailed information about its content and because they were uncertain how they could help their children best. Communication with parents was constrained in part by the evaluation procedure. In other settings, it might be useful to develop written and pictorial material that explains the work to families and that could form the basis of a discussion between children and parents.

In addition, parents would have welcomed the opportunity to talk to the counsellor about how to support their children and to obtain feedback about the intervention. Future interventions may need to find a balance between protecting children's confidentiality and ensuring that parents feel involved and informed about the work. This might be achieved by running one or two joint sessions with parents and children.

Developing inter-agency liaison

One head teacher pointed out the importance of developing inter-agency liaison between all the potential groups who could be involved in any one school. This would allow schools to be clear what was on offer, by whom, in what way, and enable them to plan for the best use of the agencies when they came into school.

Modifying elements of the work

Similar interventions might learn from some of the teething problems experienced by the project. Teachers observed most disruption when children returned to class with items or food that they had been given in the sessions. Arranging for children to collect things at the end of the day provides a simple solution to the difficulty.

Many parents and children felt that children had developed a greater sense of themselves and become more confident as a result of the work. However, children were also described by some parents as being more difficult, angry, or aggressive. Some parents put this down to greater self-awareness and confidence while others thought their children had simply become more difficult (see Chapter 4). Parents might benefit from being informed before the work of some of the ways children might respond to the support and how best to handle these responses.

The timing and length of support offered

A number of parents expressed the opinion that the most useful time to offer support would be just after the separation. The counsellors, however, reported that children on the project, whose parents had been separated for a long time, raised similar issues to those raised by children whose parents have separated more recently. Issues for both types of children included coping with: two homes; contact arrangements; family conflict; financial worries; and too much responsibility. Parents might benefit from being encouraged to think of divorce as a process rather than a one-off event and that children can have quite troublesome ongoing concerns even some time after parental separation.

Although the counsellors expressed a preference that the work be conducted at the same time each week, parents, teaching staff and children raised some concerns about missing too much schoolwork. Future interventions could explore the impact of offering support before school, in lunchtimes, after school or staggering the timing of sessions.

Children in the group format requested longer sessions because it had not always been possible to fit everything in. Children in the individual format requested more sessions and the opportunity for longer-term involvement.

Providing support in the long term

Some parents were keen to see support provided in the long term. Similarly, many schools were keen to continue offering children some type of support but most were constrained by funding difficulties. Head teachers were aware that there were significant numbers of children and parents finding it difficult to cope and noted a range of issues where support could be helpful to parents or children. Such topics included behaviour problems, bereavement, bullying, friendship problems, transferring to secondary school, relationships, self-esteem, anger management, basic skills, parenting skills, prison and substance addiction. Given the opportunity, most head teachers would like to have someone available to talk to children, parents or staff who needed support. Some suggested that this might be on demand, some that it might be through prearranged weekly drop-in sessions. All felt that having a trained, familiar, reliable person available in school would be a valuable asset. Head teachers suggested that the support could come from someone like a school nurse, with suitable training, who might be familiar to families and staff. One-to-one support could be given for children in stressful situations and groups could be run once a year. In one school the head teacher's ideal would be to have breakfast and after-school clubs which contained support options for children and parents.

The process of obtaining parental consent and dealing with child protection issues requires clear guidelines.

While protecting children's confidentiality was deemed important and helpful, participants had observed some difficulties in the interpretation of confidentiality. Some children had felt unable to talk to others about the issues raised by the work and this had caused difficulties, particularly with friends not involved in the support. Some parents felt shut out of their children's experience of the project by the constraints of confidentiality and so felt unsure how to support their children for the best.

The counsellors and most of the heads, teaching staff and parents commented on the importance of good communication to facilitate the smooth running of the work. In particular, parents sought more

information about what was covered in the sessions and teachers sought some dialogue with the counsellors running the work to optimise the support received by the children.

School staff, parents and counsellors felt that children are most likely to benefit from support where it can be provided in a flexible format that responds to the needs of the child. It was suggested that a combination of individual and group sessions might be the best way to achieve this.

9 Conclusions

Did the children benefit from the work?

The children's perspective
According to the analysis of the psychometric measures, children in both formats improved on aspects of mood, self-esteem, behaviour and social and peer relationships. The greatest improvements were observed for children who participated in the individual sessions and these improvements appeared to be sustained six months after the support work ceased. Although trends in analysis were positive, few statistically significant results were obtained and no differences between format were found once the analysis took account of children's background characteristics.

Children were asked to describe if and how their lives had changed as a result of the work. Most children felt their lives had improved in a number of ways. In particular, they talked about improvements in how they handled their emotions; how they got on with the rest of the family; their understanding and acceptance of parental separation; and their attitude towards and experience of school and peer relationships.

Few children found the support unhelpful. Some children had found it difficult missing lessons, had found the work a bit boring, confusing or upsetting, and felt that relationships with friends had deteriorated.

The parents' perspective
Parents also observed improvements in children as a result of the work. Parents described improvements in children's sense of self, mood and behaviour and a greater willingness and ability to talk about feelings, the family and the non-resident parent. From the parents' perspective, children understood more about parental separation and were able to cope better with its issues. Relationships with peers and attitudes to and experience of school were also described as improved.

Not all parents observed changes for the better. Some children were said to be unsettled by the work and more emotional and needy. A few parents felt that children's enhanced sense of self had precipitated more rows and anger. A deterioration in behaviour and self-confidence, along with poorer relationships with the non-resident parent and other adults, was also reported in some cases.

Was the intervention acceptable?

Children, parents, the counsellors and school personnel were all largely positive about the intervention. Children reported feeling better following their involvement and valued expressing their thoughts and feelings, being listened to and hearing about the experiences of others. Most children particularly liked practical aspects of the work such as drawing, making things and the games. Children in the group format described how they appreciated the chance to share, to hear about other children's experiences and to get positive feedback from their peers. Children who participated in the individual sessions described how they appreciated the chance to talk to someone about their experiences and about things they could not discuss elsewhere.

Parents thought children found the work a positive experience and derived particular benefit from the support of the group or the individual attentions of a counsellor. From their own perspective, some parents felt they would have been in a better position to support children if they had been given more information about the intervention and the opportunity to talk to the counsellors and obtain feedback.

Teachers and head teachers were supportive of the intervention and had not found it disruptive of school life. Teachers were pleased that children were given the space and attention needed to help them talk about their troubles and feelings.

Similarly, head teachers were aware that there were a whole range of issues that children and their parents would benefit receiving support around. Head teachers were keen to see ongoing support available to families and staff in the school setting, but were constrained by lack of funding.

The counsellors who ran the support had found school an acceptable setting in which to provide support compared with support offered from a specialist centre. They were largely supportive of this type of work and reported benefits for children who participated. Commenting on providing a similar intervention in the future, the counsellors mentioned the need for excellent communication with schools and the need for flexibility in deciding which format would suit which children and in deciding the composition of a group.

Is one format better than another?

Although children who participated in individual sessions appeared to derive greater benefit from the work, parents and children were generally more positive about the experience and impact of the group work. Observed differences between children in each format were, on the whole, not large and there were no significant differences identified once children's background characteristics were taken into account. The counsellors, school personnel and parents were keen to see future support structured in a flexible way, perhaps offering a combination of individual and group sessions. This may be the way forward.

Is there a future for this type of support?

Despite the generally positive response to and impact of the support as observed by the schools, families and counsellors, funding is not generally available to do this type of work. Without funding, schools are obliged either to provide nothing, to make use of existing staff that may not have received appropriate training, or to seek donations and grants. None of these options meet the pressing and ongoing need to offer support to families in the school setting.

Does the intervention raise questions for future research?

Although the project collected a large amount of information about the acceptability and impact of the intervention, there remains more to learn about the needs of children at different stages of their development, about the 'right time' to offer support and how to continue to provide support to children once an intervention ends. Research issues are not discussed in detail here because they are covered more comprehensively in the review, recently commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, of the provision available to children experiencing family transitions (Hawthorne *et al.*, 2003).

Conclusions

A regular experience of many children is that they feel a lone child in a world of adults, with no one to hear their problems. Parents may not be available to help, either physically or because they are struggling with their own distress, and children may feel that there is nowhere else to turn. The findings from this project suggest that children may benefit from the opportunity to talk about and address their distress, to gain comfort and support in realising that others share similar experiences and feelings in general and that school-based support is a viable situation for this to take place.

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Appendix 1

Details of the support work provided in school by the counsellors on the project

The group sessions

The children engage in a number of activities in each session that promote group and individual identity. For example, there is the 'ball positive name game' whereby children think of a positive adjective starting with the same letter as their forenames and then throw a soft beanbag ball around to members of the group and the facilitator, calling out their names and the positive adjectives (for example Happy Harry). In addition, children are given A4-sized name cards and each week they are given a sticker for it.

Session one aims to explain the purpose of the group and to establish a group identity.

Session two continues to build group identity and safety. Children are encouraged to talk about their own families and the feelings they may have about the changes that have occurred. The aim is to discuss and normalise different family structures.

Session three names and acknowledges feelings. It introduces words to describe feelings commonly experienced by children when their parents have separated and it gives the group permission to express and experience a range of feelings, particularly negative ones.

Session four continues to familiarise children with their feelings, including how and when they experience and express certain feelings, and to explore possible coping strategies. A group photograph is also taken.

Session five encourages children to think about their families, as they are now, how they have changed and what, if anything, they may be finding difficult.

Session six encourages children to think about their families in the past and present and to think about hopes for the future. It also continues to encourage the children to have a positive sense of identity.

Session seven draws the group to an end and reminds children about the purpose of the group, again acknowledging both the communality and diversity of their family experiences. It also aims to remind the group of others who can help or listen to them. Children are given a copy of their group photograph to take home.

Follow-up session. No formal activities are arranged. The group shares a cake and the children talk about what they have done since the last session. The children choose stickers and the individual name cards are given out for the children to take home.

The individual sessions

As in the group situation, each child is given a card with their name on. At each session the card is produced and the child is given a sticker for it. The aim is to help each child develop a sense of identity and value.

Session one sets the scene and the counsellors and child begin to build a relationship.

Session two encourages the child to think about family structures and to normalise diversity. The child is encouraged to talk about their own family, including the changes that have occurred.

Session three enables children to name and acknowledge feelings and introduces words to describe commonly experienced feelings when parents separate.

Session four seeks to work on self-image and thinking about the future.

The *follow-up session* is an informal session to catch up on news and any important events. The child discusses what he or she remembers about the previous meetings, what they liked most, what changes are coming up for the child and what they might be looking forward to. The child is given their name card with stickers on to keep.

Appendix 2

Details of the recruitment process and sample

Table A2.1 Details of the recruitment process and sample

| School | Number of families and children recruited | | Consent declined by non-resident parent | |
	Number of families	Number of children from these families	Number of families	Number of children from these families
A	6	11	0	0
B	8	10	1	2
C	12	14	1	2
D	13	20	0	0
E	1	1	1	1
F	4 #	4	2	3
G	9 #	10	0	0
Total recruited	53 ##	70	–	–
Total completed project	50	69	–	–

Two families reported twice as have children in both schools.
One family moved away during the project.

Appendix 3

Characteristics of the sample

Differences on background measures for children from group and individual format

Table A3.2 records some of the differences in background found between children in the respective formats. Both formats showed a bias towards more boys in the samples and for one counsellor in particular to have led the work. The children in the individual format were, on average, slightly older and were more likely to have reached level 2 in English and Mathematics SATs.

Parents and parent-figures of children in the individual format were on average older than those of children in the group format. A slightly higher proportion of resident parents of children in the individual format had been separated for longer from their spouse and had a live-in partner.

Table A3.1 Socio-demographic characteristics of parents whose children took part in the study

Parent's socio-demographic characteristics	N	%
Highest qualification of resident parent or parent figure GCSE or below	33	66
Resident carer in professional or managerial occupation	13	26
No member of the household in employment	21	42
Resident carer is single parent with no live-in partner	41	82
Three or more children in the family	20	40
Non-white resident parent	3	6
Child has no contact with non-resident parent	15	30
Mean age of mother	35.2 (n=50)	
Mean age of father	38.6 (n=48)	

Table A3.2 Socio-demographic and background characteristics for children in the different support formats

Background variable	Group support (n=28)	Individual support (n=22)	Significant difference between formats
Average age of child (years)	7.9	8.2	
Boys in each format (%)	54	55	
Average age of child's mother (years)	34.6	35.9	
Average time since resident parent separated from non-resident parent (years)	3.5	4.1	
Practitioner 'A' working with child (%)	71	45	(*)
Three or more children in the family (%)	32	50	(*)
Child is third-born or higher in family position (%)	11	41	*
Father in professional or managerial occupation (%)	44 (n=27)	14	(*)
Partner of resident carer in professional or managerial occupation (%)	41 (n=27)	19	(*)
Maths SATs assessment below level 2 (%)	33 (n=27)	5 (n=19)	*

* Significant at 5% level.
(*) Significant at 10% level.

Children in the individual format were also more likely to be from families with three or more children, be a younger child in their family position and have siblings involved in the project.

Almost half the families had no working person in the household and this was more common in families of children in the group format. Parents and most recent parent-figures of children in the group format had a higher proportion of educational qualifications at A level or above than families with children in the individual format. When employment was considered in collapsed form, as manual or non-manual, there was very little difference between mothers of children in the two formats, but for children in the individual format much higher proportions of fathers and 'most recent' parent figures had last known employment that could be classified as manual.

Differences in baseline scores for children in the respective formats

Table A3.3 compares differences in children's scores on the baseline measures between the two formats. A higher score is better on all the measures except for child report of mood, parent report of child difficult behaviour, and teacher report of child difficult behaviour. Children who were involved in group support had better starting points according to seven out of the ten baseline scores. These were for child report of self-esteem, mood, best friendship and school friendships, perceived support from adults, parent report of child difficult behaviour, and teacher report of child classroom competence. Children who were subsequently involved in individual support showed better baselines scores for parent report of child social behaviour and teacher report of child social and difficult behaviour.

Table A3.3 Baseline scores: average measure values by support format for the reduced working sample of 50 children

Background variable	Group support (*n*=28 unless given)	Individual support (*n*=22 unless given)	Significant difference between formats
Child booklet:			
Self-esteem	3.2	2.9	*
Best friendships	119.6	119.2	
School friendships	19.2	15.4	(*)
Perception of support from adult	41.6	38.0	*
Mood^	3.5	4.6	
Parent booklet:			
Child social behaviour	13.9	14.1	
Child difficult behaviour^	13.2	13.5	
Teacher booklet:			
Child social behaviour	18.3	20.4	
Child difficult behaviour^	10.4	8.2	
Child school competence	32.7 (*n*=27)	32.3 (*n*=21)	

* Significant at 5% level.
(*) Significant at 10% level.
^ Low score is better.

Appendix 4

Actual change scores for the two support formats

Table A4.1 Average changes in outcome scores for the two support formats and statistically significant differences

Evaluation variable	Baseline scores compared with scores immediately after support finished			Scores immediately after support finished compared with scores six months after support finished			Baseline scores compared with scores six months after support finished		
	Mean group format score change	Mean individual format score change	Sig.	Mean group format score change	Mean individual format score change	Sig.	Mean group format score change	Mean individual format score change	Sig.
Child booklet:									
Self-esteem	+0.08	+0.18		+0.06	+0.11		+0.15	+0.30	
Best friend	+9.01	+3.85		−9.39	+2.36		+1.88	+6.35	
School friendships	−1.39	+3.05	(*)	+1.42	+0.86		+0.38	+3.48	
Perception of support from adults	+1.07	+4.43		−0.58	+0.71		+0.64	+5.15	
Mood^	−0.15	+0.82		−0.69	−2.41		−1.33	−1.59	
Parent booklet:									
Child social behaviour	−0.43	−0.19		+0.69	+0.38		+0.12	+0.14	
Child difficult behaviour^	+0.75	+0.14		+0.27	−1.19		+1.23	−0.82	
Teacher booklet:									
Child social behaviour	+1.96	+0.36		−2.00	−0.86		+0.41	−0.10	
Child difficult behaviour^	−1.07	−1.27		−0.35	−0.95		−1.92	−2.33	
Child school competence	+1.35	+0.10		−0.81	+1.56		+1.00	+1.47	

(*) Significant at 10% level.
^ Low score is better.