







School-based support work for children whose parents have separated

Children whose parents separate can be at greater risk of experiencing a number of adverse outcomes compared with children whose parents remain together. Research from the United States suggests that some school-based programmes can help to reduce the risks of adversity for children in changing families. However, there has been little research into such support initiatives in Great Britain. This project compared the acceptability and impact of individual and group-based support for sixty-nine children in seven primary schools.

-  The majority of children were positive about the support and about the value of being with people who had time to listen and let them talk. They also appreciated hearing about the experiences of other children.
-  Children and parents observed that the support work helped children to talk about issues, understand people and cope with relationships more easily. In addition, aspects of school seemed easier, confidence and maturity increased and relationships within and beyond the family appeared to improve.
-  Six months after the support ended, children who participated in the study showed sustained improvements on measures of self-esteem, perception of school relationships, perception of adult support, and difficult behaviour.
-  Few differences measured over the duration of the project and between support formats were statistically significant. Moreover, no differences were found between the effectiveness of the different types of support approach, once children's background characteristics were taken into account.
-  A small proportion of children felt uncomfortable talking about personal issues. Some parents felt that children had been standing up for themselves more, but had been more difficult to deal with as a consequence. Other children were described as more needy and emotional following the intervention.
-  The work was well supported by head teachers and staff in the schools involved. The majority of teachers reported that the work had caused little interference with life in the classroom.

Background to the study

The project compared the acceptability and impact of two forms of support for children whose parents have separated and assessed the suitability of the school as an environment in which to offer such support. Children were allocated to either seven sessions of group work or four sessions with an individual counsellor from a local Family Mediation Service. The support aimed to cover and involve a variety of family situations, help children express and cope with their feelings, encourage children to form a helpful sense of their own identity and to recognise positive aspects of their families.

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

The impact of the intervention according to children's and parents' accounts

Most children agreed that the intervention helped them to sort things out, was helpful and made them feel better. Parents and children observed 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 experience of and attitude towards peers and school.

Not all parents observed changes for the better. Some children were said to be unsettled by the work and were described as more angry and difficult or more emotional and needy. In a few cases, parents felt that their children's self-confidence and ability to get on with others had deteriorated. In these cases, the counsellors felt that parents would have benefited from being forewarned that support may release troubled feelings or behaviour and, in such cases, children may benefit from longer-term support through additional sessions.

"... 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." (mother of boy, age 7, individual support)

Which format had the greatest impact?

According to responses to a series of open questions, children who attended group sessions:

- Were more likely to say that the work had sorted things out for them, they had understood something better, or they had found something easier.
- Six months later were more likely to mention positive aspects about the work, including that some aspects of school seemed easier.

Responding to a series of open questions, children from the individual format:

- Were more likely to say that they had learnt something about themselves and felt more confident. They also reported that the work had helped them to understand family situations, friendships and relationships better.
- Six months after the support were even more likely to comment that the areas of home and friends seemed easier since doing the work.

The impact of the support was assessed by comparing a number of measures of mood, behaviour and well-being completed by children, teachers and parents. The findings from the analysis of these measures need to be treated cautiously because the scores are based on a relatively small sample of children and the changes in the average values of the scores are modest. Bearing these caveats in mind, the results indicate that:

- Children in both formats improved on a number of measures of social, behavioural and personal competence.
- Children who participated in the individual sessions appeared to make the greatest gains. Six months after the support work, these children showed significant improvements on measures of self-esteem, school friendships, perceived support from adults and teachers' reports of difficult behaviour.
- No significant association with support format was found once the children's background characteristics were taken into account.

What did school staff and counsellors think about the project?

Teachers and head teachers were supportive of the intervention and, on the whole, did not find it disruptive of school life ("... the kids need more than school can give"). Teaching staff felt that most children benefited from their involvement in the work, although a few children appeared unsettled by their experience of the support. In general, the intervention did not interfere with classroom activities, although the group sessions were described as slightly disruptive because there were more sessions and more children from the class attended each session.

The counsellors involved in the project were supportive of the intervention and thought that participating children benefited from the work. The practitioners found school an acceptable setting for providing support, but identified some factors that needed to be in place for the work to run smoothly. These included excellent communication between the counsellors and school staff and the willingness of support workers to commit enough time to find out

about the school, explain the work and explore how the intervention could be accommodated most easily into school life.

Children's experience of the project

Most children were positive about their involvement in the support work and its impact on their lives.

Positive responses included:

- The majority of children were keen to be involved in similar work in the future.

"... 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)

- The majority of children said that they felt better following their involvement and valued expressing their thoughts and feelings, being listened to and hearing about the experiences of others.
- Most children were happy with the support being provided in the school setting and valued meeting peers who shared similar experiences.
- The majority of parents thought that their children had found the work a positive and helpful experience.

"...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"
(mother and step-father of boy, age 7, individual support)

Not all responses were positive however.

- Some children found the work disappointing, boring or troubling, according to their parents.
- A few children did not like missing schoolwork and found returning to the classroom difficult.
- Some children were uncomfortable talking about their personal experiences and feelings.

Which format was more acceptable?

Children who participated in the group work:

- Were more positive about the intervention than those who received individual support.
- Talked about the work being fun, the chance to share problems with people and hear about others in similar situations.
- Were more likely to say that they were nervous, shy or worried before their first sessions.
- Sometimes described problems with the behaviour of other members of their group.

Children who were involved in individual sessions:

- Appreciated the chance to talk to someone about their own experiences and about things they could not discuss elsewhere.
- Learnt how talking and being listened to could

enable them to understand and cope with their feelings.

- Occasionally felt upset after the work or felt it had not helped as much as they had thought it would.

According to parents' reports, children in the individual sessions were:

- More likely to complain about some aspect of the work and to feel disappointed that they had fewer sessions than children in the group work.
- More likely to have had issues 'stirred up' or 'old wounds opened' as a result of their participation.

Issues around running a school-based intervention

- Some parents, children and teachers were concerned that children who participated in the groups missed several weeks of the same subject to attend the sessions. Timetables, forthcoming events and the commitments and social needs of the participating children need to be taken into account when an intervention is set up.
- The process of obtaining parental consent and the procedures for dealing with child protection issues both require clear guidelines.
- 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. A combination of individual and group sessions might be the best way to achieve this.
- Despite parents and researchers talking to the children about the nature of the support work, children often appeared unsure about the purpose of the sessions at the start of the intervention. Future support may benefit from developing pictorial and written material describing the work that can be used by parents as a basis for discussions with children.
- According to reports from all project participants, children did not break the promise of confidentiality that they made at the beginning of the work. However, some problems with confidentiality emerged. Despite encouragement from the counsellors a few children felt unable to talk to others, such as parents or friends, about the issues raised by the support. This created tensions with friends not involved in the support and left some parents feeling excluded.

Could the work be improved?

Children had clear ideas about how the work might be improved:

- Children in the groups wanted longer sessions so that they could fit everything in.
- Children who received individual support requested more sessions and involvement over a longer period of time.

- Children suggested that the work should be more widely known about and that more children should be encouraged to become involved.

Parents suggested that:

- More information about the format and content of the work should be made available as this would put them in a better position to support children and respond to issues that came up in the course of the work.
- It would be helpful to talk to the counsellors working with the children. This might take the form of an introductory session with the counsellor to discuss relevant family experiences and to gain advice on how to handle issues that might result from their children's involvement in the intervention.
- Feedback about how the work was progressing should be provided, at the same time guarding their children's need for confidentiality.
- A family aspect to the work could be developed whereby parent and child worked together on topics or where siblings worked together to identify common issues and learn how to support one another.

School staff suggested some improvements:

- Teachers suggested that more contact with the counsellors would be helpful and would provide an opportunity to discuss the background, progress, outcomes and future support needs of the participating children.
- Head teachers thought that similar work should be developed for children with special needs as they might not cope in a more mixed ability environment.
- Head teachers also suggested that an intervention should offer some support to parents, such as a one-off session. This, it was proposed, might encourage people to seek further advice or support when needed.

About the project

Two infant schools, one junior and four combined infant/junior schools participated in the project. All were in the state sector. The number of families from the seven schools involved in the project was fifty. Sixty-nine children took part in the support sessions over the course of the project.

Group support sessions involved between four and seven children. Separate groups were run for five to seven year olds (infant-level children) and eight to eleven year olds (junior-level children). The groups were held once a week for seven weeks and were led by

a counsellor and an adult helper. The individual support comprised four weekly sessions on a one-to-one basis with a counsellor. Both formats held an informal follow-up session a few weeks after the support work had finished.

Parents and children who took part in the project were interviewed about their experiences before, immediately following and six months after the support work. Psychometric scales were used with children, parents and class teachers at these same time intervals to investigate the impact of support on areas such as self-esteem, relationships, mood and behaviour. Head teachers were interviewed to gain a 'whole school perspective' on the support programme. The two counsellors submitted written reports about running the intervention.

How to get further information

The full report, **Schools and family change: School-based support for children experiencing divorce and separation** by Anji Wilson and Janet Edwards with Susie Allen and Carol Dasgupta, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation as part of the Family Change series (ISBN 1 85935 099 2, price £13.95).