



adjustment  
stability  
relationships  
security  
contact  
communication  
involvement

# CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES OF PARENTAL SEPARATION

Diane Hogan, Ann Marie Halpenny and Sheila Greene  
Children's Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin



adjustment  
stability  
relationships  
security  
contact  
communication  
involvement

# CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES OF PARENTAL SEPARATION

Diane Hogan, Ann Marie Halpenny and Sheila Greene  
Children's Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin

© 2002 The authors

Published by:

The Children's Research Centre  
University of Dublin  
Trinity College  
Dublin 2

ISBN: 190 223 015 9

The Children's Research Centre was set up by Trinity College in 1995 as a joint initiative of the Department of Psychology and the Department of Social Studies. The Centre undertakes research and evaluation on issues and policies concerning children and young people. The Centre is multidisciplinary in approach and works in close collaboration with other members of the University, practitioners and policy makers, and international colleagues. It also works through partnerships with statutory, voluntary and community bodies concerned with children and young people. The Centre has a range of publications.

The Centre may be contacted as follows:

The Children's Research Centre  
Trinity College  
Dublin 2

Tel. +353 1 608 29 01

Fax: +353 1 608 23 47

Email: [ccentre@tcd.ie](mailto:ccentre@tcd.ie)

www: [http://www.tcd.ie/Childrens\\_Centre](http://www.tcd.ie/Childrens_Centre)

The research was undertaken with the support of the Department of Social and Family Affairs.

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and are not necessarily those of the Children's Research Centre or of the study's funders.

Design and production: Red Dog

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b>	<b>iii</b>
List of Tables	vi
List of Figures	vi
<b>FOREWORD</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>viii</b>
<b>SUMMARY OF FINDINGS</b>	<b>ix</b>
Background	x
Methods	x
Findings	x
Recommendations	xiv
<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
Introduction	2
Background to the study	2
Overview and aims of the study	3
Approach to the research	4
Structure of the Report	5
<b>CHAPTER 2: CONTEXT FOR THE STUDY</b>	<b>7</b>
Introduction	8
The Irish socio-demographic context	8
The Irish legislative context	10
The Irish socio-cultural context	11
The family policy context	12
The research context	13
<b>CHAPTER 3: DESIGN AND METHODS</b>	<b>15</b>
Study design and parameters	16
Definition of terms	17
Sampling approach and process	17

Ethical issues	18
Data collection	19
Data analysis	21
<b>CHAPTER 4: PROFILE OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES</b>	<b>23</b>
Introduction	24
Age and gender of children	24
Length of time since parental separation	26
Discussion	27
<b>CHAPTER 5: CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES OF THE SEPARATION PROCESS</b>	<b>29</b>
Introduction	30
Awareness of parents' relationship difficulties	30
Learning about the separation	31
Children's involvement in decision-making about family arrangements	35
Discussion	38
<b>CHAPTER 6: CHILDREN'S REACTIONS TO PARENTAL SEPARATION</b>	<b>39</b>
Introduction	40
Initial reactions	40
Children's feelings	41
Children's views about parental separation	46
Children's expectations regarding their parents' separation	48
Discussion	52
<b>CHAPTER 7: CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES OF PRACTICAL AND SOCIAL CHANGES FOLLOWING PARENTAL SEPARATION</b>	<b>53</b>
Introduction	54
Change of residence	54
Change of school	56
Patterns of contact with non-resident parents	57
Care-giving	61

Contact with extended family	62
Impact on school work	63
Discussion	64
<b>CHAPTER 8: CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES OF RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR PARENTS FOLLOWING SEPARATION</b>	<b>65</b>
Introduction	66
Resident parents	66
Non-resident parents	69
Inter-parental conflict	72
Inter-parental co-operation	74
Discussion	75
<b>CHAPTER 9: CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES OF COPING AND SUPPORT</b>	<b>77</b>
Introduction	78
Informal sources of support	78
Schools	83
Support Services	84
Barriers to seeking and accepting support	87
Personal coping strategies	92
Views on what <i>could</i> have helped	94
Discussion	95
<b>CHAPTER 10: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>97</b>
Introduction	98
Feelings and perspectives associated with the separation	98
Consulting children	100
Patterns of change associated with separation	101
Patterns of adjustment and coping	102
Key findings	110
Discussion	111
Recommendations	111

<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>117</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b>	<b>123</b>
Appendix A: Overview of selected service provision for children of separated parents	124
Appendix B: Interview Schedule	126
<b>LIST OF TABLES</b>	
Table 1: Ages of children	24
Table 2: Number of years since parental separation	27
Table 3: Change of residence by age group of children	55
Table 4: Resident parent by age group	56
Table 5: Change of school by age group of children	57
Table 6: Contact with non-resident parent	58
Table 7: Type of service attended	84
<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b>	
Figure 1: Ages of children	25
Figure 2: Gender breakdown of children by age group	25
Figure 3: Number of siblings	26
Figure 4: Length of time since parental separation	26
Figure 5: Feelings experienced by children	41
Figure 6: Change of residence	54
Figure 7: Resident parent for each age group	56
Figure 8: Location of non-resident parent	59
Figure 9: Type of service attended	85





## FOREWORD

We have all heard in recent times about the changing face of modern Ireland. Many of us will know of couples who have gone through the trauma of separation and I am acutely aware of the increased support that families need in time of difficulty.

But what about the children of these families? Government, through the National Children's Strategy, promised that children's lives will be better understood. Nowhere is that promise more important than in the whole area of parental separation.

The publication of Children's Experiences of Parental Separation is one of the most anticipated events since the Government's *Families Research Programme* was first launched in 1999.

The study, which was supported by the Department of Social and Family Affairs, deals with the experience of sixty children, aged between eight and seventeen years, most of whose parents had separated within the last five years. The study set out to gain an understanding, from children's perspectives, of the impact of parental separation on their lives and the support needs that arise from these experiences.

The summary of the findings will make a major contribution to the debate about the separation of couples, the consequences for their children and how their lives can best be supported and enhanced.

I was struck by the findings that children differed in their experiences of parental separation and that consequently it was not possible to conclude that separation was either a positive or a negative experience. However patterns of shared feelings and perspectives were identified and these could contribute a greater insight into how children can be best supported following parental separation.

The experiences and reactions of children, which are documented in detail in the study, are stark testimonies of the emotional angst experienced in times of parental separation. Worry for themselves, worry for their parents, distress, embarrassment and a strong sense of being different to other children were some of the common feelings identified by children themselves in the research. These testimonies should remind all of us with a brief in this area that we should remain focused on the people at the centre of a break up and on the services and supports that they need.

Finally I would like to express my thanks to Diane, Ann Marie and Sheila for this excellent report which is a prime example of the type of research needed to help direct family policy towards a more inclusive and caring society.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mary Coughlan". The signature is fluid and cursive.

**Mary Coughlan TD**  
**Minister for Social and Family Affairs**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was funded under the *Families Research Programme* of the Department of Social and Family Affairs. We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Department and the Family Affairs Unit.

We are especially grateful to all of the children who met with us and told us about their experiences. We also wish to thank their parents for agreeing to the interviews and facilitating meetings with us.

We gratefully acknowledge the time and support given to this research project by all members of the research advisory group: Aileen Courtney, Claire Missen, Irene Duffy O'Brien, Mary Lloyd, Eileen Fitzgerald, Heber McMahon, and Brendan Walker. We wish to highlight the contribution of Aileen Courtney, Claire Missen and Irene Duffy O'Brien, who played a central role at all stages of the project.

We are also grateful for the support we received from a number of agencies and schools. We thank the schools principals, home-school-liaison teachers, and guidance counsellors who helped us to make contact with families and allowed us to use their facilities for our interviews. We are also very grateful to the services that helped us to locate families and also offered the use of space in their offices: Barnardos, Teen Between, Teen Counselling, Rainbows, and the Family Mediation Service

We would like to thank all our colleagues at the Children's Research Centre for their ongoing support and advice throughout all stages of the project. In particular we would like to convey our thanks to Robbie Gilligan for his helpful and insightful comments on earlier drafts of the report and for his help in making contact with schools and agencies. We also thank Fiona Daly and Elizabeth Nixon for their help with data analysis. We give special thanks to Anne O' Neill for her invaluable help in the production of the report.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

adjustment  
stability  
relationship  
security  
contact  
communication  
involvement  
family

## BACKGROUND

The number of separated couples in Ireland is increasing, and public concern is growing about the consequences for children who experience this kind of change in their family life. The present study explores the experience of parental separation for children aged 8-17. The aim of the study was to describe how parental separation affects children's lives, from their own perspectives, including their views and feelings about the changes that occur in their everyday lives, such as at school, at home, and in their relationships with parents and other family members. Another aim was to discover what sort of support children experienced and needed, and the strategies they used to cope with the changes in their family life.

## METHODS

The study used a qualitative approach to explore children's perspectives on their parents' separation. Individual interviews were conducted with 60 children – 36 girls and 24 boys – most of whose parents had separated within the previous five years. The ages of the children at the time of the separation ranged from 2 to 10 years, with an average age of 8 years. Children were contacted through schools and a range of agencies. 67% of the children had attended support services in connection with their parents' separation. None of the children said that they had directly experienced court proceedings, and only two children mentioned court involvement in the separation. For the purposes of data analysis, two age groups were created: 8-11 years ('younger children') and 13-17 years ('older children').

## FINDINGS

Children differed considerably in their experiences of parental separation, sometimes even within the same families, and therefore it is not possible to conclude that separation is either a 'positive' or 'negative' experience for children. However, some patterns of shared feelings and perspectives were identified, and these can contribute to greater insight into how children's well-being can best be supported and enhanced following parental separation.

### ***Experiences of the separation process***

- Children experienced the separation as both an *event*, usually marked by one parent moving out of the house, and a *process*, involving adjustment over time, and experience of further changes in family structure.
- Many children were aware of their parents' relationship difficulties but were typically shocked to learn that their parents were separating. Most were told about the separation

by their parents once the decision had been made. A minority had not been told about the separation, but only realised that separation had occurred when a parent left the home and did not return.

- It was important for children to receive reassurances from parents that they were concerned about their children's well-being and committed to being available for them.
- Communication between parents and children about the separation was highly important for all children, but especially adolescents. Children who were able to understand their parents' decisions or behaviour were better able to adapt to these family changes.
- Communication was important not only at the time of separation, but over time, as families underwent further change, such as the addition of new family members, and as children themselves grew and changed.
- Children whose non-resident parent had left suddenly and without explanation were particularly confused and distressed.
- The large majority of children said that they had not been consulted about family arrangements concerning custody and visits with non-resident parents. Many did not want to be asked to make such major decisions.

#### ***Reactions to parental separation***

- Children typically reacted to their parents' separation with a mix of negative and positive feelings, often felt simultaneously, for example sadness and relief.
- Most children felt that separation was the best solution for their family, given the relationship difficulties between their parents.
- Many children had a strong sense of being different from other children, and felt embarrassed to talk about their parents' separation.
- Many children were worried about the implications of the separation, both immediate and long-term. Some were worried about their parents' well-being.
- Some children were concerned about parents developing relationships with new partners. However, children tended to have strong expectations that their non-resident parent (usually their father) would continue to play the role of parent, in spite of any further changes.

### ***Experiences of practical and social changes***

- All children had to adjust to living with one parent instead of two, and this adjustment process was experienced as a significant difficulty for most children.
- There was, however, a great deal of continuity for many children in core aspects of their lives; for example, most children continued to live in the same house and attend the same school after separation.
- Children experienced little change after the separation in their contact and involvement with members of their extended families, such as grandparents.
- 90% of children lived with their mothers after the separation, while 7% lived with their fathers and 3% with relatives.
- Most children said that they experienced high levels of contact with non-resident parents (mainly fathers); more than two-thirds of children said that they had contact with their non-resident parent at least once a week. There was no clear pattern of declining contact as time passed since the separation.
- A minority of children had little or no contact with their non-resident parent at the time of interview, in some cases by their own choice.
- One of the most important issues for children was maintaining their contact and relationships with non-resident parents. Children who did not see their non-resident parents as much as they would like, or who had no contact with non-resident parents, were more likely to be distressed about the separation.

### ***Relationships with parents following separation***

- Children who had good relationships with parents before the separation were likely to continue to have good relationships after the separation.
- Children who had experienced high levels of conflict or violence in the home felt relief when this was resolved. They felt more at ease with both parents, and felt that parents had more time to focus on them. A continuation of conflict after the separation was upsetting for children and exacerbated their sense of being different from other families.
- The adjustment was more difficult when parents criticised each other or where there was little or no positive contact between the parents. Cooperation and mutual respect between parents helped children to have a better relationship with each parent.
- Clear and open communication contributed to better child-parent relationships, helping children to understand their parents' feelings and behaviour.
- 30% of children believed that their relationship with their non-resident parents had mainly improved since the separation in terms of the quality of the time they spent together, and parents' emotional availability. 28% of children perceived their relationship with non-resident parents to have disimproved. A further 28% stated that

there had been no change in the relationship. 14% did not discuss this issue. The most sensitive issue was that of contact. Relationships became strained when children perceived parents to lack commitment to maintaining contact and involvement.

### ***Coping and support***

- The family, and particularly parents, constituted the most important and valued source of support for children. Friends were also an important source of support, but not necessarily as confidantes. Most children who had received support from formal services found them to be very helpful. School was also found to be helpful by some children.
- Family members helped children by listening and by providing information and reassurance. Services providing individual counselling helped because they provided someone to listen and to help children to make sense of their own views and expectations about family change. Participating in a group-support service, used by approximately two thirds of the younger children, helped by reducing children's sense of being different from others. Schools and peers often helped children in indirect ways, such as providing a source of distraction.
- Parental separation was a very private matter for children and most were reluctant to talk to other children or to teachers. They were sometimes unsure about whom they could trust to understand and accept them and were most willing to talk to people they believed would understand them, such as other children whose parents had separated or divorced.
- Children valued distraction as a way of coping, especially those of primary school age. They enjoyed spending time and sharing activities with others who had similar experiences, though not necessarily talking about such matters.
- Many children actively helped themselves to cope and to adapt, making conscious choices about whom to talk to about the separation, and adopting strategies that helped them to cope.

### ***Gender***

- There was gender imbalance in the study in children's contact with services; a higher proportion of adolescent girls than boys had been in contact with support services in relation to their parents' separation. Most children, however, both boys and girls, who had been in contact with a service, felt that it had helped them in some way.
- Girls were more likely than boys to indicate that friends had been an important source of help.
- More girls than boys said that their relationships with resident parents had improved after the separation. More girls than boys found that missing their non-resident parent was the most difficult aspect of the separation. There were no gender differences, however, in reported frequency of contact with these parents.

## ***Age***

Children's age was an important factor in their experience and support needs.

- Some children who were very young when their parents separated were unable to remember their parents living together, but could articulate the meaning that separation had for their lives.
- Older children were better able to understand their parents' choices and behaviours and this helped them to cope with the separation.
- Younger children were more accepting of arrangements made by their parents about residence and visiting non-resident parents. Children who had chosen to have reduced or no contact with their non-resident parent were all in the older age group.
- Younger children did not necessarily feel the need to talk about the separation; they felt comforted by engaging in play or other activities with children whom they knew had similar family circumstances. Friendships were more important to older children as a source of support.

## ***Families with multiple problems***

- Some families experienced a number of significant difficulties in addition to separation, such as alcoholism, domestic violence, parental depression, etc. These difficulties may be exacerbated by the separation and present further barriers to children's coping.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- A range of accessible support programmes should be offered to address the varied and changing needs of all family members, both at the time of separation and afterwards. Support services should be available for those who need it on a rapid basis around the time of the separation.
- Attention should be given to the particular service needs of families experiencing multiple difficulties in addition to separation.
- Information on services should be widely disseminated.
- Provision should be made for ongoing research and evaluation. There is a need for research on trends in service uptake by children, parents' support needs, and children's experiences of court processes. Current services for children should be evaluated.
- Family policy regarding supports for families experiencing parental separation should be coordinated with legislative developments and service planning.



- The needs and rights of both children and parents should be given due consideration in the development of policy, should be underpinned by Irish legislation and by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and should be integrated with the National Children's Strategy.
- Family policy should encourage continuity and stability in family relationships, should promote an ethos of lifelong parental responsibility for children and facilitate long term contact and involvement between children and non-resident parents. It should also promote parental cooperation after separation.



CHAPTER 1:  
INTRODUCTION

adjustment  
stability  
relationship  
security  
contact  
communication  
involvement  
family

## INTRODUCTION

The structure of Irish families has changed substantially in recent years. One aspect of this rapid social change is the increase in rates of parental separation. There are numerous social, economic and policy implications of this trend, but perhaps the issue that has given rise to greatest public concern is the consequences for children who experience family breakdown (Greene, 1995). This issue was highlighted in the final report of the Commission on the Family, *Strengthening Families for Life* (Fahey, 1998), in recognition of ‘the many pressures on families in today’s fast-moving world, and the numbers of families experiencing family breakdown’ (p.180). The present study explores the meaning of parental separation for children.

The impact of parental separation on children’s lives is a matter of concern in Ireland and internationally, and it has long been a topic of international social, psychological and family research (see Rodgers & Pryor, 1998, for a review). This body of research, largely conducted in the US and the UK, has led to a number of important findings regarding risks to children associated with parental separation, including financial hardship, and social and psychological problems. This research is limited in what it can tell us about the experiences of children, for two reasons. First, it focuses mainly on outcomes for children, rather than on the *processes* by which children are affected by separation. Second, it relies primarily on the use of objective testing, and rarely seeks children’s own accounts of events and experiences in ways that allow them to provide descriptions of their experiences and their needs, from their own perspectives.

The present study used mainly qualitative interview methods to facilitate children’s telling of their own stories of their experiences of parental separation, and its consequences and meanings for their lives. The study adopted a child-centred and developmental approach to understanding the experiences and needs of children whose parents have separated. It is hoped that this study of Irish children’s experiences will aid the development of family policy in this area and will provide information for the development of intervention programmes to help offset stress to children and to mitigate risks.

## BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

In 1999, Irene Duffy O’Brien, an associate with ACCORD Dublin, on behalf of three key voluntary organisations involved in the delivery of support services to children whose parents are separated (ACCORD Dublin, Barnardos and Teen Between), approached the Children’s Research Centre, Trinity College, with a view to making a joint application for funding to conduct a study of children’s experiences of separation. This dovetailed with preparatory work in the Children’s Research Centre to seek funding for a study on this issue. The outcome was the establishment of the ‘Working Group on the Impact of Parental Separation on Children in Ireland’.

This inter-agency group successfully applied for funding under the *Families Research Programme* of the Family Affairs Unit, Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs.

The study was subsequently conducted by a team of researchers at the Children's Research Centre at Trinity College. The members of the research team were Diane Hogan, Ann Marie Halpenny and Sheila Greene.

The research project was supported by an advisory group. The role of the group was to provide advice and guidance throughout the research process, through input into design, methods, access, and ethics, as well as reading and commenting on draft reports. The advisory group was chaired by Dr Sheila Greene, Chairperson, The Children's Research Centre. The other members of the group were:

Aileen Courtney, Manager of Family Centre, Barnardos

Irene Duffy O'Brien, Associate with ACCORD Dublin

Dr Diane Hogan, Senior Research Fellow, The Children's Research Centre

Eileen Fitzgerald, Area Co-ordinator, Family Mediation Service

Ann Marie Halpenny, Researcher, The Children's Research Centre

Mary Lloyd, Service Co-ordinator, Family Mediation Service

Heber McMahon, Family Affairs Unit, Dept. of Social & Family Affairs

Claire Missen, Team Leader, Teen Between

## OVERVIEW AND AIMS OF THE STUDY

The aims of the study were to gain an understanding, from children's own perspectives, of the impact of parental separation on their lives, and the support needs that arise from these experiences.

**1. *To gain an understanding from children's own perspectives of the impact of parental separation on their family lives, relationships and lifestyles***

Parental separation may trigger a series of changes in a child's life, such as changes in relationships with parents, changes in residence and school, changes in parental work patterns, and family arrangements that may place strain on both parents and children. The separation may also bring changes to children's lives that are positive. The present study explored the nature and impact of these changes on children's lives and the ways in which these changes affected their relationships with other family members and with their friends.

**2. *To gain insight into children's experiences of the separation process, and those factors which contribute, positively or negatively, to children's adjustment to the process of parental separation***

The present study explored children's perspectives on the factors that helped them to adapt to the transition involved in their parents' separation. It gave children an opportunity to describe their reactions to, and feelings about, their parents' separation,

and to describe their subjective experiences of the events surrounding the separation, including their access to information and their participation in decision-making about family arrangements in connection with the separation. It also sought children's views about what happened in their family and about separation generally.

**3. *To explore children's experiences of formal and informal support and to examine implications for a child-centred approach to family policy***

The study explored children's perspectives on their experiences of formal and informal support, including their views on the key supports that helped them at critical times of transition and adjustment throughout the process of parental separation.

## **APPROACH TO THE RESEARCH**

The three defining features of our approach to this research study were: a focus on children's subjective experiences, the use of qualitative methods and analyses, and the adoption of a developmental perspective.

### ***Focus on children's experiences***

This study departed from mainstream approaches to the study of children and parental separation/divorce, and indeed from the traditional approach to the study of children in their families generally, by focusing on children's subjective experiences. Increasingly, researchers across several disciplines are drawing attention to the widespread failure to include children's own experiences of events in research about children (Butler, 1996; Garbarino & Stott, 1992; Hogan, 1998). Recently, greater attention has been paid to the value and necessity of listening to children's own voices in gathering information about their needs, both in research and in policy (Hogan, 1998; Hogan, Tudge & Etz, 1999). At a policy level in Ireland, the most significant development in this regard is the National Children's Strategy (2000), which adopted the goal that 'Children will have a voice in matters which affect them'. The present study focused on what children had to say about their experiences, how they made sense of them, and how they felt about them, rather than seeking 'objective' information about what occurred in their lives.

### ***Qualitative methods***

The approach to this study was qualitative and, as such, the main emphasis was on understanding the *meaning* of parental separation for children, drawing on their subjective experiences. It was essentially exploratory, in that it did not begin with assumptions or hypotheses about the nature of children's experiences, but sought to explore them through the study. It did not assume that children's experiences were necessarily negative, and conceptualised separation as a process, that is experienced and coped with over time, rather than as a single event.

### ***Developmental approach***

This study explored the experiences of children in two age groups, 8-11 years (middle childhood) and 13-17 (adolescents). Children's responses to parental separation are related to their age (Greene, 1995), and it is important that research takes a developmental perspective in order to explore the different meaning that children of different ages bring to the experience.

## **STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT**

The report is set out in ten chapters. Chapter 2 describes the context for the research, in terms of changing social-demographic context of Irish society, the legislative context, and the research context. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the design and methods used in the study. In Chapter 4, a profile of the sample for the study is presented. In Chapters 5 to 9, the principal findings of the study are presented, under the headings of Children's Experiences of the Separation Process, Children's Reactions to Parental Separation, Children's Experiences of Change following Separation, Children's Relationships with Parents following Separation, and Children's Coping and Support Experiences.

The final chapter draws together the key findings, and explores the implications of the research. In this chapter, recommendations for service provision and family policy are presented, based on the findings of the study.





CHAPTER 2:  
CONTEXT FOR THE STUDY

adjustment  
stability  
relationship  
security  
CONTACT  
communication  
involvement  
famil

## INTRODUCTION

Children's experience of their parents' separation must be understood within the social and cultural context in which the separation takes place. This chapter examines contextual features that are of particular relevance for children's experiences of parental separation. Firstly, it describes social-demographic characteristics relating to separation and divorce. Secondly, it describes the legislative context, with particular reference to recent developments regarding divorce, and also the social-cultural context, with reference to social values about the family. Thirdly, this chapter examines the family policy context. Finally, the research context for the study is discussed.

## THE IRISH SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

The demography of Irish society is an important feature of the current social context for children's experience of parental separation and divorce. The trend in Ireland appears to be towards increasing variation in family forms (Fahey & Russell, 2001; McKeown and Sweeney, 2001). One important feature of this change is an increase in the number of separated couples.

Comprehensive statistics on marriage breakdown are not available, and it is not possible to determine the rate of marriage breakdown (Fahey & Lyons, 1995). Census data indicate, however, that in the decade 1986 to 1996, the numbers of separated persons doubled, from 37,200 in 1986 to 87,800 in 1996 (Fahey, 1998). Expressed as a percentage of those ever-married (excluding widows), 3.3% of men were separated/divorced in 1986, compared with 7.1% in 1996. For women, the percentages were 2.1% for 1986 and 5% for 1996. It is important to note that these numbers reflect families in which parents were previously married, but do not include those where cohabiting (non-married) couples shared the parenting of the child, as well as residing together, and subsequently parted; therefore, the numbers of children affected by parental separation are likely to be greater than these figures suggest.

Increases can also be seen in raw figures on the numbers seeking judicial separation in 1996 (1,740) compared with the number seeking either divorce or judicial separation in 2000 (3,339 and 1,392 respectively) (Courts Service Annual Report, 2001). In one analysis, Fitzgerald (1999) predicted that the Irish divorce rate would rise to 15-20% within a few years.

These figures suggest that parental separation is a significant feature of Irish family life, affecting substantial numbers of families. These changing demographics reflect the trend across many western societies, where the numbers of one-parent and step-parented families are rising. Divorce rates have been rising steadily in the neighbouring jurisdictions of England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, as well as in the US, Canada, New Zealand and Australia (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Haskey (1994a) estimated that more than 18% of children in the UK lived with one parent in 1991, and that 20% of children will become

part of a step-family by age 16 (Haskey, 1994b). It is possible that since separation, divorce, and single parent families are more common now than previously, children will experience the effects of separation differently. At the same time, with the increase in numbers of parents who are never married but cohabit, and of single parent (never married) households, children of separated parents may find that their situation is less of a social aberration than may previously have been the case. It is important to bear in mind, however, that we do not know whether the Irish figures reflect real change in the numbers of couples separating; legal provision has made it possible for couples to formalise and gain legal sanction for their family arrangements where once they may have separated informally. Furthermore, the numbers are still relatively small compared to those reported for other jurisdictions (cf. Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Parental separation cannot be considered to be a common experience for children in Ireland.

Demographic trends alone do not, of course, provide insight into the meaning of parental separation for the families it affects, or their capacity to cope with its effects. In the following sections, we provide a brief introduction to the legislative and social context of parental separation in Ireland, and to current family policy in respect of children of separated parents.

While all children of separated parents will share one common experience – that of adjusting to the fact that both parents no longer live together in one household – their social and psychological experiences are related, at least to some extent, to the cultural context in which this occurs. Public attitudes to the breakdown of marriage form an important part of the social context in which children experience the process and aftermath of their parents' parting. These attitudes, which are related to values and ideologies surrounding marriage and family, are specific to both cultural and historical context (Greene, 1995). Arguably, they not only shape social reactions to marital breakdown, but also influence the meaning attached to marital breakdown at a policy level, and the support and services made available to families to cope with such transitions. Thus, children's beliefs, feelings, and capacity to cope will be shaped, at least in part, by social-cultural expectations regarding ideal family forms, the degree of social censure applied to those who do not conform to these expectations, the support available for parenting post-separation, and the nature of support made available to help children to cope with any distress, sadness or confusion they may experience when their parents part.

## THE IRISH LEGISLATIVE CONTEXT

Legal provision and legal change are other important aspects of the context for understanding children's experiences of parental separation. The legal framework surrounding marriage and its dissolution, which reflects societal values and traditions, affects children's experiences in at least one significant way; it regulates parents' ability to live apart, to divorce and to remarry. The importance of the family in Ireland is enshrined in the 1937 Constitution under Article 41, wherein the State guarantees to 'guard with special care the institution of marriage, on which the Family is founded' (Article 41.3.1). Until 1997, a further stipulation of the Constitution was that 'No law shall be enacted providing for the dissolution of marriage' (Article 41.3.2).

Although the ban on divorce remained until recently, legal separation has been available in Ireland, in various forms, for many years. A married couple may separate by agreement, reflected in a legal contract, without recourse to the courts (although it must be confirmed by the courts). The agreement can cover issues such as living separately, custody of children, property ownership, maintenance payments, taxation, succession rights, etc. If such an agreement cannot be reached, it may be necessary to obtain an order of the court. The Judicial Separation and Family Law Reform Act (1989) provides a procedure for couples to separate from each other. The Act requires evidence of fault, and allows for applications on grounds including adultery, unreasonable behaviour, desertion, separation with consent for one year, and separation without consent for three years. Most applications are made on a neutral basis, however, with each party acknowledging that the marriage has broken down for more than one year (Walls & Bergin, 1997). A decree of judicial separation gives the right to live apart, but not to remarry. If the couple reconcile, they can do so without remarriage.

Following a referendum on 24 November 1995, the 15th Amendment of the Constitution Act 1995 was passed, resulting in the replacement of Article 41.3.2. The Family Law (Divorce) Act (1996) was passed, and came into operation in February 1997, for the first time allowing couples to obtain a decree of divorce in the Republic of Ireland. Divorce can be granted where a court is satisfied that the spouses have lived apart for a period of 4 of the 5 years prior to making the application, and where there is 'no reasonable prospect of reconciliation'. Under divorce law, the right to remarry is granted, and, if reconciliation occurs, it is necessary to go through the procedure of marriage again (Walls & Bergin, 1997).

Each of the above legislative categories allows for the making of orders regarding property, maintenance, and care and custody of children. Some parents separate, of course, in the absence of any marital contract. These families are outside the constitutional definitions of the family and, therefore, beyond its protection (Kiely & Richardson, 1995). All children are, however, protected under the Child Care Act (1991).

Another important feature of the Irish legislative context, that is important for understanding children's experiences, is the absence of legislation to define either children's or parents'

rights with regard to access to each other. Children's right to maintain contact with their parents, regardless of custody decisions, is set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), under Article 9.3. To date, however, these rights have not been defined under Irish law.

## THE IRISH SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT

Traditionally, in Irish society, the family has been equated with the institution of marriage, and indeed this is reflected in the Constitution. The ban on the dissolution of marriage in the Constitution reflected the teaching of the Catholic Church (Kiely & Richardson, 1995; Wood & O'Shea, 1997) and the majority of public opinion in the early years of the Irish Republic (Wood & O'Shea, 1997). Kiely and Richardson (1995) point out that the family has also been interpreted in these terms by the Supreme Court (*State [Nicholau] v. An Bord Uchtála*, 1966), reflecting 'the influence of Catholic social teaching, the value system of a highly agrarian society and an idealised vision of the family in Irish society' (p. 27). The high value placed on the two-parent family based on marriage has endured over time, in spite of the emergence of greater variation in family types in recent decades. Public resistance to a shift in this position was reflected in the high levels of opposition to removal of the ban on divorce in the referenda of 1986 and 1995. Social context is not, of course, homogenous, even within a small country, and this was reflected in the different voting patterns on the divorce referendum in 1995, with greater support for the introduction of divorce legislation in the Dublin area and other large urban centres, presumably where greater variation in family forms is to be found (Woods & O'Shea, 1997).

Views on divorce do not necessarily mirror those on separation, as there may be more public tolerance of spouses living apart under legal agreement, especially since separation, in itself, does not constitute a breach of Roman Catholic teaching on remarriage. It should be recognised, therefore, that children whose parents have separated but not divorced might have a different experience of public reaction and support than those whose parents divorce, either following or instead of separating. Those living in step families may have different experiences again, since divorce means that parents have gained the civil right to remarry, and having actually gone through with another marriage may attract a different level of social censure from those opposed to divorce.

Although there are indications that attitudes towards marriage are changing in Ireland (Fine-Davis, 1988), along with many other social changes, it is nonetheless likely that children will experience, to some degree, negative social attitudes to parental separation, however finite the legal arrangement is. It is in this context that it is important to explore children's experience of communication within the family about parental separation, and the manner in which the decision to separate is communicated to the extended family, to friends, and to the wider community. The anticipation of censure from others may, in itself, place strain on parents and, in turn, affect their willingness and capacity to communicate openly with their children about separation. There is no existing research from the Irish Republic on

children's experience of social stigma attached to parental separation, but Fawcett (1998), in her study of adolescents in Northern Ireland, found that children raised the issue of the social stigma of separation and divorce. This sense of stigma was reflected in the accounts of isolation, embarrassment and shame reported by many family members about the breakdown of the family unit. Many participants stated that they viewed divorce as a 'private' family matter, and it was apparent that this created significant barriers to telling others outside the family. The author suggests that this sense of stigma can be partly understood in terms of cultural context; one factor to be considered is that rates of divorce in Northern Ireland are lower than in other parts of the UK. Other research findings in Northern Ireland on related areas, such as domestic violence and lone parenting, support the view that social attitudes have a significant impact on the help-seeking process (McWilliams & McKiernan, 1993; Spence, 1996). Telling others, or approaching formal support systems for help, means facing up to the reality of one's situation and, at the same time, breaking the social rule that family matters are best kept within the family. Given the significance of social attitudes in affecting uptake of services, it is clearly important to identify any such barriers experienced by children.

## THE FAMILY POLICY CONTEXT

Until recent years, Article 41 was the only explicit statement of Irish family policy, and responsibility for the family was spread across several government departments (Kiely, 1995; McKeown & Sweeney, 2001; O'Riordan, 2001). McKeown and Sweeney (2001, p. 4) have described Irish family policy as 'highly diffuse and difficult to define'. This is not to say that the State did not respond to specific economic and social changes as they affected family life, or to deny the range of services put in place to support the family across a wide range of policy areas (such as social welfare, housing and childcare), but rather to point out that the State had not undertaken to develop a broad and integrated family policy framework. This could also be said of policy in relation to children, with the exception of the Child Care Act, 1991.

In the last two decades, there have been some important changes, and we will highlight two areas of policy development that are pertinent to children's experiences of parental separation, and particularly to service provision. Taking these developments chronologically, family policy has, in the last decade, received greater attention. The Commission on the Family was set up in 1995 to identify policy needs. The Commission emphasised the importance of support for family and for marriage, but also recognised increasing heterogeneity of family forms and lifestyle (Fahey, 1998). The Commission's establishment reflected a growing awareness at policy level of the need to place the development of family policy higher on the political agenda. Among its many recommendations, the Commission pointed to the need to promote continuity and stability in family life, both through support for marriage and reconciliation, and through support for families where parents have decided to separate. The Commission recognised that the experience of discontinuity in

family life, through parental separation, could be distressing for children, particularly if the process of separating is adversarial. It pointed to the need for the development of a clear policy framework for the development of support services (such as counselling) to families, and for further exploration of the need for support programmes for children experiencing the loss of a parent through separation or bereavement. It also recommended the promotion of awareness that children should be recognised, within the family and in the wider community, as having rights to adequate support, care and protection of their well-being. To this end, monetary support has been provided, through the Family Affairs Unit of the Department of Social and Family Affairs, for some services that offer specialised supports, such as counselling and peer support programmes for children, and marriage and relationship counselling for couples. The Family Mediation Service was established on a pilot basis in 1986 and, in 1998, became part of the Department of Social and Family Affairs. The State-funded service, which is independent of the courts, provides an avenue for a non-adversarial approach to separation agreements, and this can help couples to reach an agreement on arrangements for children. More recently, legislation was passed to establish the Family Support Agency (2001) with the aim of bringing cohesion to the implementation of family policy and to support for service provision.

In the area of policy relating specifically to children, the most important recent development is the National Children's Strategy (2000), which sets out a coherent policy strategy in respect of children, aiming to bring about better understanding of children's lives, increasing their participation in many areas of life, and improving services. This development has occurred in the context of the emergence of raised levels of consciousness about children's issues and rights (Greene & Moane, 2000).

## THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

The impact of parental separation on children has long been a topic of international social, psychological and family research. This research, largely conducted in the US and the UK, has led to a number of important findings regarding risks to children associated with parental separation, including financial hardship, and social and psychological problems (see Amato, 2001, for a review). Much of the international research focuses solely on outcomes for children and, as such, its contribution to our understanding of the *processes* by which children are affected by family dissolution is limited, and it is difficult to devise intervention programmes to help offset stress to children, and mitigate risks. As mentioned earlier, another feature of this research is that it rarely seeks children's own accounts of events and experiences. As a consequence, although a substantial amount of literature has accumulated about separation and its effects on children, there are still gaps in our knowledge about *children's* views about parental separation. Investigations have concentrated largely on the experience of adults, and children's reactions and responses are often seen only through the eyes of parents and professionals working with children in this area. Indeed, most research on children is carried out with adults as the primary source of

information about children, thus diminishing the potential contribution that children themselves can make to creating an understanding of their lives and needs (Hogan, Etz & Tudge, 1999). Research on families, in particular, tends to sidestep the issue of children's individual experiences, and their perspectives on either family dynamics or their own behaviours are not typically sought (Bretherton & Watson, 1990; Hogan, *et al.*, 1999; Moore, Sixsmith & Knowles, 1996).

Fawcett's (1998) study in Northern Ireland, *What hurts? What helps: A study of needs and services for young people whose parents separate and divorce*, was the first published study conducted on this island in which the experiences of the children of separating and divorcing parents was given priority. The study reports on the perspectives and emotional responses of young people aged 12-18, whose parents had separated or divorced within the last five years. A key focus of the study is on the young people's experiences of informal and formal support systems. Parents and professionals were also interviewed. Like the Fawcett study, the present study explores young people's awareness of their parents' difficulties prior to separation, the practical and social consequences of the separation, their feelings about the separation, and the impact on parent-child relationships. While Fawcett's study is confined to the age group 12-18, however, the present study included a wider age range, including children aged 8-17. Furthermore, the focus of this study is exclusively on the experiences of children.

Two groups of researchers, one in the UK led by Carol Smart (Neale & Smart, 1998; Smart & Neale; 2000; Wade & Smart, 2002 ) and one in New Zealand led by Anne Smith (Smith, Taylor, Gollop, Gaffney, Gold, & Heneghan, 1997; Smith & Gollop, 2001) have recently published findings based on their in depth qualitative studies of children's experiences of separation and divorce. A large scale study by Judy Dunn and Kirby Deater-Deckard, with 467 children aged between 5 and 16 years, has examined the views and experiences of children in step-father, step-mother and single parent families following parental separation and divorce (Dunn & Deater-Deckard, 2001).

It can thus be seen that there is a growing value among researchers and their funders for seeking a greater insight into children's views, feelings and understanding of separation and divorce, and a growing ethos of respect for the role of children as social actors in a process involving all family members.



CHAPTER 3:  
DESIGN AND METHODS

adjustment  
stability  
relationship  
security  
CONTACT  
communication  
involvement  
famil

## STUDY DESIGN AND PARAMETERS

The present study investigated the experiences of children, aged 8-17 years, most of whose parents had separated within the last five years. The following is an account of decisions about the study parameters.

### *Definition of terms*

It is difficult to define parental separation precisely, as some parents may be divorced and therefore living separately, while others may have remarried and be living with a new or 're-ordered' family. In other situations, parents may have a judicial separation or a separation agreement and have ceased to cohabit, while still others may perceive themselves to be separated, but are not yet living apart. Furthermore, increasing numbers of couples are cohabiting and do not enter into a marriage contract. The following criteria were used to define the sample for the present study:

- For the purposes of this study, the time of parental separation was defined as the point at which parents establish separate accommodation.
- The study set out to include the experiences of children whose parents have separated within the last five years, in part to allow comparison with the findings of Fawcett's (1998) study of young people in Northern Ireland. The sample that was obtained, however, includes six children whose parents were separated more than five years.
- This study was open to including children of parents who had not been married, but who had shared parenting and lived together. Such families were included where it was evident that the parental relationship was a committed relationship over a period of two years. This decision was taken based on the child's point of view, that is, whether the child defines the person as a mother or father [in the actual sample, only one family fell into this category].
- The emphasis was placed on parental separation, rather than on divorce. The study's focus was on the processes and impact of the separation or partitioning of the family unit. For this reason, the term 'divorce' was not used in describing the study to potential participants, but this did not rule out the inclusion of families where parents were divorced.
- This study was confined to the issue of children of separated parents, and did not address the issue of children's experience of bereavement through parental death. These issues were seen to be quite different, for several reasons; for example, separation is a more hidden bereavement, with potentially less closure, and with different levels of support available to children.

## SAMPLING APPROACH AND PROCESS

The researchers aimed to purposefully sample a heterogeneous group of children with a range of experiences and family backgrounds. It was not the intention to obtain a sample that was representative of any one group of children. The sample includes children who are known to services, children receiving services, and children who are not in contact with services. The sample was predominantly recruited from within the Dublin area, since resources did not permit otherwise, and also services may be substantially different outside Dublin.

### *Gaining access to the sample*

A multi-faceted approach was taken to recruiting the sample of children. The recruitment took place in two phases; first, a pilot phase, beginning in summer 2000, and second, the main phase, beginning in September 2000 and completed in June 2001.

Gaining access to the sample involved a range of activities:

- **Agencies:** Contact was made with relevant agencies with connections to children/families, through their involvement in the provision of support services, including Barnardos, Teen Between, Teen Counselling, Rainbows, and others. Information was disseminated, with explanations of the study aims and parameters. (See Appendix A for an overview of selected services)
- **Schools:** Contact was made with schools, through Rainbows and through direct contact with school personnel, such as school principals, home-school liaison teachers and guidance teachers.
- **Families:** Direct contact was made with parents, once a 'gatekeeper' such as a home-school liaison teacher had obtained their consent to be contacted by the study team. A newsletter was created for potentially interested families, which was circulated through agencies and schools.

It should be noted that the process of gaining access to a sample was complex and protracted. As Fawcett (1998) points out, the time consumed by this process is, in part, a reflection of the complexity of relationships within separating and divorcing families. It is our view that other factors also came to bear on the difficulties we experienced in identifying 60 children to participate in the study. One such factor may be the privacy with which the issue of separation/divorce is perceived in Irish society. As our findings show, many children are themselves reluctant to talk to strangers about their experiences, and this may reflect a reluctance by their parents to disclose their views and feelings beyond the family. It seems likely that some families may have declined to come forward to participate in the study for this reason. Another factor may be that those families that are experiencing multiple problems and are under greatest stress may not be in contact with support agencies. It proved particularly difficult for us to gain access to participants through support agencies offering a wide range of support services, while we were more successful in gaining

access to participants when they had received counselling through services specialising in support for families experiencing parental separation/divorce.

It should be noted that, once contact had been made with families who had shown an interest in the study, parents and children were very generous with their time.

## **ETHICAL ISSUES**

This research study was mainly concerned with children's views, and therefore there were ethical issues specific to children's needs that had to be given special consideration. While many of the ethical issues affecting children are similar to those of adults, children's vulnerability, because of their age and their relative powerlessness, as well as the more limited understanding of younger children, requires special acknowledgment (Hill, 1998).

### ***Informed consent***

First, parents' permission was sought for children's participation in the study. A personalised letter was given or sent to parents, asking them for their consent to complete a family background questionnaire, and to their child being interviewed by a researcher. They were assured of the confidentiality of the information they and their children would provide. They were also sent or given a summary of the research study, and invited to talk to the researchers about any concerns or questions they may have regarding participation.

Children were also fully informed about the nature of the research, and the expectations regarding their participation. Once parents had agreed to allow their child to take part in the study, children were approached, either by agency personnel or by the researchers, to explain the nature of the study. Researchers endeavoured to ensure that those children who took part in the interviews were clear about the nature of the study, and that they were willing to take part, and that they did not feel pressure to assent to participation. They did so by spending time at the start of each interview ensuring that children were fully aware of the nature of the study and the confidentiality of the interview, by explaining to children that they could refuse to take part in the study, although their parents had already given permission for them to take part. It was also explained that if, at any time during the interview, they felt uncomfortable and wished to discontinue for that day, or to withdraw from the study, they could do so.

### ***Confidentiality***

Information provided by parents and children was kept confidential and was not shared among participants; for example, the content of children's interviews was not shared with adults. If parents were concerned about not having access to information provided by their children, it was explained to them that an important element of the research was to offer children an opportunity to describe their experiences in confidence.

### ***Support for children***

Research concerning potentially difficult personal experiences raises some concerns that participation may be distressful for some children. It was decided, from the outset of this study, that efforts would be made to provide children with easy access to follow-up support if they needed it after participating in interviews. It was not feasible to offer children counselling immediately following interview sessions, as no appropriate service could be identified which was in a position to take on this role. Other measures were put into place, however, including identification of agencies/counsellors willing to take referrals on a 'fast track' basis, so that children were not placed on lengthy waiting lists. Arrangements were also made with school guidance counsellors to 'follow up' children who had been interviewed, at an appropriate interval, to offer support if needed.

## **DATA COLLECTION**

The fieldwork comprised two main elements: interviews with children, which form the core of the study, and a brief questionnaire about family background, which parents were asked to complete. The interviews were conducted in a variety of settings, including children's homes, schools, and in agencies with which they had contact. Children were interviewed in private, to afford them the opportunity to speak freely about their experiences.

It was necessary to adopt a flexible approach to collecting information from parents about family circumstances and background (see next section for description). In some instances, parents completed the short questionnaire alone and returned it to the researcher, while, in other cases, parents received assistance from professionals working in support agencies to complete the form. It is notable that some parents did not return the questionnaires and, therefore, there is missing socio-demographic information for some families. Parents' reasons for not returning forms are unknown, but are likely to include lack of time to complete the form, forgetting to send it back, and unwillingness to disclose the information requested on the form. Since the main focus of the study was on children's experiences, it was decided not to exclude a child on the basis of missing data from the parent.

### ***Family Background Questionnaire***

A short questionnaire was developed for resident parents, which asked them for details of their family that are more appropriate to ask of adults than children, and which are important in providing a context to interpret children's descriptions of their experiences. The questionnaire included sections on family composition (duration of marriage/partnership, date of separation, custody arrangements, contact with services), current living arrangements (household composition, place/area of residence of non-resident parent, visiting arrangements/degree of contact of non-resident parent with child), and socio-economic background (education, occupation, housing).

### ***Interview schedules***

Semi-structured interviews were used with younger children and adolescents (see Appendix B). They were designed with the aim of allowing children to describe parental separation and to create a narrative about their subjective experiences of the process. A certain degree of structure was necessary to ensure that specific aims of the study were addressed through the questions (e.g. communication, understanding and support needs). The following domains were explored in the interviews:

- Description/narrative of separation process
- Practical consequences of the separation
- Children's understanding of separation and its implications for family life
- Children's responses to, and feelings about, the separation
- Children's coping and experiences of support, both informal and formal

### ***Feelings checklist***

A checklist was used during the interviews as a visual prompt for children to help them to talk about their feelings.

### ***Five Field Map***

The interviews incorporated the Five Field Map to help children to consider the value and meaning of support from different domains of their lives. This visual prompt, which represents five different domains in life in which support might be available to children, included family, friends, school, services, and extended family. The Five Field Map contains three concentric rings, indicating the level of help that children received from each of these domains through the process of their parents' separation (helped a lot, helped a little, did not help).

### ***Other non-verbal aids to the research***

The interview schedules were supplemented by the use of *family drawings* with younger children, and a Family Links Map (Teen Between Skills Resource Book) with older children/adolescents. Younger children were asked at the outset of the interview to draw a picture of their family, as they saw it. The researchers provided paper and coloured markers. The drawings were used as a way of prompting discussion about children's experience of family life, and the impact and meaning of the separation of their parents, rather than as an analytic tool. With adolescents, the *Family Links Map* was used at the start of the interviews, as a means of providing some structure for the children in describing their family relationships and in providing a 'map' of the family. Children were asked to indicate on the family links map where they would locate members of their family spatially, in relation to themselves located at the centre of the map. They were also asked to indicate the strength

of their relationship to the individuals included on the map. All of the instruments were subject to a pilot stage, to check their suitability for use with children of the specified ages, and for investigating this particular topic.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

The data were mainly qualitative, consisting of the transcripts of the interviews with children. In addition, some quantitative data were collected from parents, and some of the children's responses were coded quantitatively. The children's transcripts were analysed in full, using Content Analysis. The data were analysed, in the first instance, in keeping with research questions identified in the original study design. Further themes emerging from the data were also identified and coded. Quantitative data were stored and analysed using SPSS 10.





CHAPTER 4:  
PROFILE OF CHILDREN  
AND FAMILIES

adjustment  
stability  
relationship  
security  
contact  
communication  
involvement  
family

## INTRODUCTION

The sample was made up of 60 children, the majority of whose parents had separated or divorced in the last five years. The sample included nine sets of siblings – two children from each of eight families, and three children from one family. It was not possible to create a socio-economic profile of the children and families.<sup>1</sup>

## AGE AND GENDER OF CHILDREN

A total of 60 children were interviewed. The children who took part in this study were in two age groups: 8-11 and 13-17 years. The sample was created in this way to allow comparisons to be drawn between children in middle childhood and those in adolescence. Such comparisons can lead to a greater understanding of developmental change in children's experiences and needs.

These were 30 children in the younger age group (8-11) and 30 in the older age group (13-17). The average age of children in the younger age group was 9 years (SD = 0.93), while, in the older age group, the average age of children was 15 years (SD = 1.2). The age composition of the sample can be seen in Table 1 and in Figure 1.

TABLE 1: AGES OF CHILDREN

Years	No.	%
8	5	8.3
9	12	20.0
10	9	15.0
11	4	6.7
13	3	5.0
14	12	20.0
15	4	6.7
16	9	15.0
17	2	3.3
Total	60	100.0

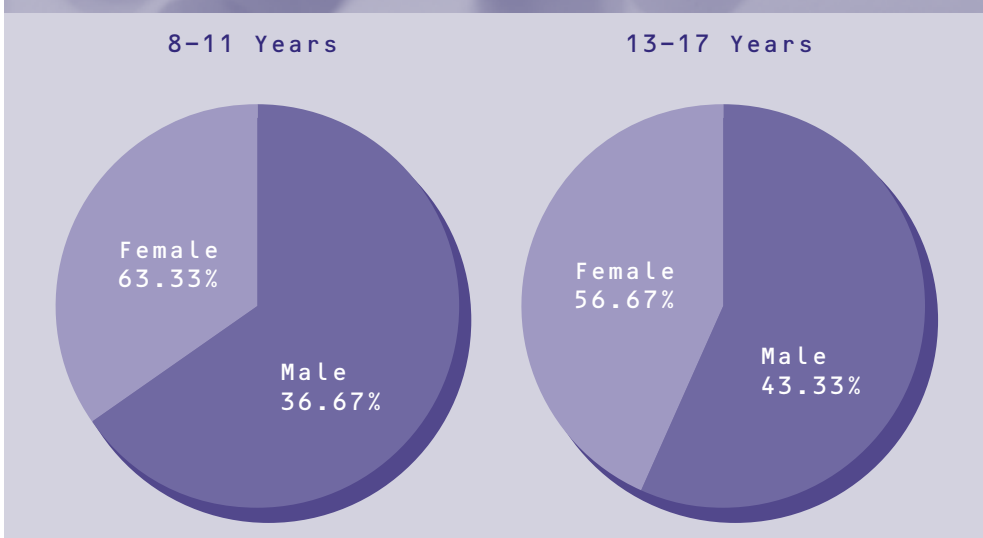
<sup>1</sup> The Family Background Questionnaire, which contained questions about socio-economic background, was not returned by a sufficient number of families to allow for a socio-economic profile to be created.

FIGURE 1: AGES OF CHILDREN

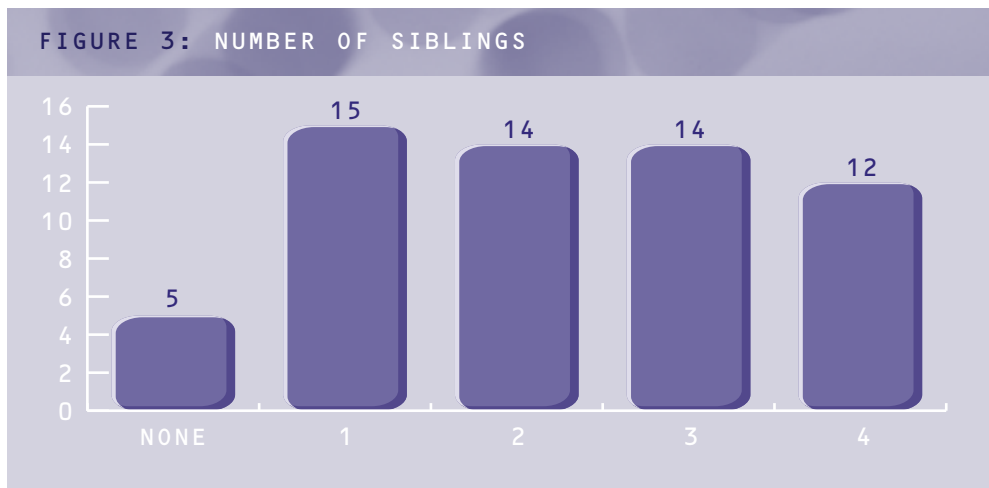


The study included 36 girls (60%) and 24 boys (40%). Figure 2 shows the gender breakdown of younger and older children that were interviewed. The proportion of younger children that were male was 37% (11) and 63% (19) were female, while 43% (13) of older children were male and 57% (17) were female.

FIGURE 2: GENDER BREAKDOWN OF CHILDREN BY AGE GROUP

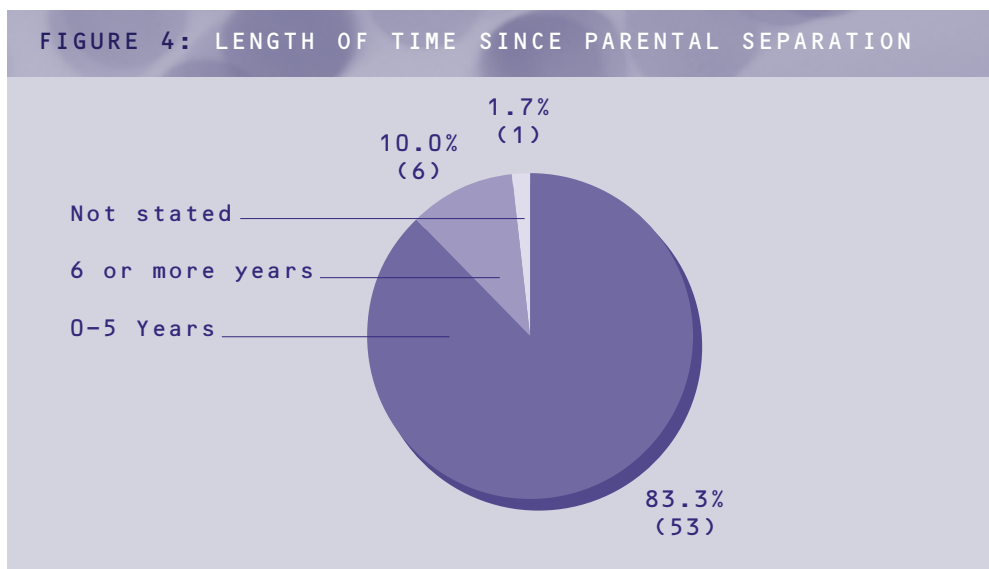


The majority of the children had more than one sibling, as Figure 3 illustrates.



**LENGTH OF TIME SINCE PARENTAL SEPARATION**

The majority of the children (53, or 88%) had experienced their parents' separation within the previous 5 years, (see Figure 4) but the range was approximately 1 to 13 years. Table 2 provides a further breakdown of the length of time since parental separation. It is important to note that many of the children in the older age group (27%) were aged eleven or less when their parents separated. The average age of all children in the sample at the time of separation was 8 years (SD= 3.5). In the younger age group, children ranged between ages 2 and 10 at the time of separation (mean = 6, SD = 2.4), while in the older age group the age range was from 3 to 15 years (mean = 11, SD = 2.6). 34% of children in the older age group were aged 13 years or over at the time of the separation.



**TABLE 2: NUMBER OF YEARS SINCE PARENTAL SEPARATION**

	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
One year	11	18.3
Two years	9	15
Three years	7	11.7
Four years	12	20
Five years	14	23.3
Six years	1	1.7
Seven years	2	3.3
Eight years	1	1.7
Ten years	1	1.7
Thirteen years	1	1.7
Missing data	1	1.7

## **DISCUSSION**

The sample consisted of 60 children ranging in age from 8 to 17 years, most of whom had experienced the separation of their parents during the last 5 years. Approximately two-thirds of the children had at one time received support through a formal service provider and, in most cases, these were services specialising in issues of parental separation. Most of the children lived in and around the Dublin area, with a small number living in towns outside of Dublin and one in the West of Ireland. The sampling was extended beyond the Dublin area, because it was difficult to gain access to a sample of this size. The sample was recruited through agencies providing services for families, and through schools. It is not a representative sample of children whose parents have separated, and the findings must be considered in light of this. It may be that children whose parents believed them to be coping well were more likely to agree to their children's participation. It may also be the case that those children who have been in contact with a formal support service are better able to reflect on their experiences of parental separation, and this may contribute to a more positive response to the research process. Since we do not have information about potential participants who were not contacted about the study, or who did not volunteer to participate, it is not possible to identify such possible sources of bias in the sample obtained. The study is of an exploratory nature, and future studies should be based on random sampling to allow for generalisability of findings. The present study can, however, help to shed light on the experiences and needs of children whose parents separate, and highlight future specific research needs on this topic.



CHAPTER 5:  
CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES OF  
THE SEPARATION PROCESS

adjustment  
stability  
relationship  
security  
CONTACT  
communication  
involvement  
family

## INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we present children's descriptions of the ways in which they came to know about the separation, and their reactions to learning that their parents would no longer live together. It also presents children's reports of their involvement in making any decisions about family arrangements such as custody and access, and their views on involvement.

*I'd no idea, so  
when it did  
happen, I was  
in terrible shock  
for a long while.*

Girl, aged 15,  
1 year since  
separation

## AWARENESS OF PARENTS' RELATIONSHIP DIFFICULTIES

Almost all of the children were aware that their parents were experiencing difficulties in their relationships, before they learned about the separation. They became aware of problems in a range of different ways, including conflict between their parents, their parents spending little time together, and their parents sleeping in separate bedrooms.

Many of the children in the younger age group (19), and thirteen in the older age group had been aware of conflict between their parents prior to the separation. In addition, one younger child and five of the older children described violence, against a parent or the child or both, before the separation.

*You realise that [there are problems] when they always fight.*

(boy, aged 16, 5 years since separation)

*I always thought there was a problem because me and [my sister] used to sit at the top of the stairs and listen to them and when we'd hear them coming we'd run upstairs again ... we knew they fought a lot.*

(girl, aged 14, 5 years since separation)

Some of the older children had memories of tension between their parents, but felt that they did not understand the implications or the seriousness of the problems when they were younger:

*Like, looking back I suppose I can see why they separated and things like that, and certain fights ... but because I was so young, I didn't actually realise there was problems.*

(girl, aged 16, 5 years since separation)

Some children also saw a diminishing of contact between their parents as a signal that there were more serious problems. Several had observed that their parents no longer shared a bedroom, and perceived this as an indication that there were serious problems:

*When they, we moved house when I was about, I think, four years old and they didn't share a room after that ... And I did question that but it was covered up quite well, I*



*think ... I always thought there was conflict there and it was a bit worrying, but I never thought that there were any real problems.*

(girl, aged 17, 4 years since separation)

Although many were aware that such difficulties existed, most felt surprised, and some were deeply shocked, when their parents decided to separate. One 15-year-old girl understood that there were some problems – ‘the way my dad wasn’t there all the time made my mum really lonely’ – but was completely taken aback when conflict escalated and the separation happened.

*I’d no idea, so when it did happen, I was in terrible shock for a long while.*

(girl, aged 15, 1 year since separation)

*[When] my mom told me ... I was very surprised actually ... she kind of told me just like casually ... and it didn’t make sense to me, but it did, sort of like ... it was such a shock.*

(girl, aged 17, 4 years since separation)

*I was a bit stunned. Like, I didn’t know what to do, I didn’t know what to say.*

(girl, aged 14, 5 years since separation)

*R: When did you first know that your mum and dad were going to separate?*

*C: When they were fighting and shouting at each other.*

*R: Did you think they would separate then?*

*C: I never knew that people could separate ... before then.*

*R: Ok. So when would you say you really knew?*

*C: When my dad told me about the judge ...*

(girl, aged 9, 2 years since separation)

Children’s reactions to the separation, in terms of their views and feelings, are reported in greater detail in Chapter 6.

## LEARNING ABOUT THE SEPARATION

The manner in which children came to learn about the separation varied considerably. It should be noted that, since some of the children were quite young at the time of their parents’ decision to separate, they did not in all cases have clear memories of how they had been told about it, nor about the day on which the family began to live in separate homes, usually with one parent – typically the father – moving out.

Many of the younger children (12) were told about the separation by their resident parent alone, in all cases their mother. Four children were told about the separation by their non-resident parent alone, while two children were told about the separation by both parents together. Other children were told about the separation by siblings, or gradually learned about what was happening over time. A small number of children could not remember who, if anybody, had told them about the separation. Some children gave details of what they remember their parent(s) saying at this time and some examples are given as follows:

*They just said that, em, 'me and your dad are not going to be living together anymore but you're still going to see each other and it doesn't mean you haven't ... we haven't stopped loving you,' or something ...*

(girl, aged 11, 4 years since separation)

*Well, my mam just said that ... 'we keep on fighting'.*

(girl, aged 8, 4 years since separation)

*He just said ... we were in the car and he was dropping us back and he said ... 'I'm not going to live with you any more. It's not that I don't love your mam. It's just that it would be better this way and ehm ... we won't be fighting'.*

(girl, aged 10, 5 years since separation)

Children in the older age group were more likely to have been told about the decision to separate by both parents together (10 children), while six children were told by their resident parent, and a further six were told by their non-resident parent.

*Dad said, 'do you want to tell them?' Then ... mum, crying with the tea towel in her hand, said, 'your father has found someone else and doesn't want to be here'.*

(girl, aged 14, 1 year since separation)

*On a Sunday, when we had Sunday dinner ... we'd finished and they just said it out, they said, 'we're separating' ... mum just goes, 'Look, we're not getting on really and we're not very happy and we don't think you're happy'.*

(girl, aged 14, 5 years since separation)

*Me ma ... just says, 'Me and your da had a fight'. And I goes, 'oh' and she goes, 'I've thrown him out'.*

(boy, aged 14, 3 years since separation)

In the older age group too, eight children said that they had not actually been directly told by anybody. As with the younger age group, some had come to learn over time that their parents were not going to live together anymore, while others had learned through overhearing conversations, and witnessing conflict between their parents, when a parent was barred from the home, and when a parent left suddenly and did not return to live in the house, as the following examples illustrate.

*'Cause me ma and da were up in court and got a barring order. So that's how I knew.*

(girl, aged 15, 1 year since separation)

*Me ma walked out of the house ... stress was too much for her ... it was two years later I saw her.*

(boy, aged 14, 5 years since separation)

*Well I kind of found out, I heard my mum shouting at my dad over the phone. This was the day before Christmas Eve ... I was really upset but I didn't want to say anything. She just kept saying, 'It's over now, don't bother coming back or anything'.*

(girl, aged 15, 1 year since separation)

*I didn't know really what was going to happen, like, I knew that there was problems but I didn't know what was happening ... and in the first few weeks ... 'is he coming back or not?' and then ... we realised that he wasn't coming back at all.*

(girl, aged 17, 4 years since separation)

In general, the pattern was for parents to communicate with children about the separation *after* a decision had been made to separate. It is possible that at an earlier point parents had wished/hoped that they would resolve their differences without separating, and did not want to expose their children to the notion of impending change or loss needlessly. They may also sense that they are likely to separate, but have not reached a conclusion between them, and do not wish to present children with a 'messy' or 'unresolved' issue of such emotional significance. Their reasons can only be speculated upon here.

When children were aware that there were serious difficulties, or had witnessed conflict and even violence, the lack of information added to their confusion and distress.

*Well, me da hadn't been there for a few days and [me mam] said he was out working, but then she knew she couldn't keep it back anymore ... and I was asking her why and then, like, me granny and granddad were coming up all the time because me mam was crying ... so I knew that something was going on and then she eventually told me.*

(girl, aged 14, 5 years since separation)

It is important to note that the circumstances of the separation played a role in determining how the children came to know about it. In families where parents left suddenly, for example, children discovered what was happening when their parent did not return home, as was the case for one adolescent girl whose father left with little warning when she was younger, and now lives in another country. She was shocked at the time, and distressed in the years that followed, about the lack of clear communication from her parents about what was happening in the family.

*I would have liked to know why they were going to split up ... When I was growing up I*

*Well I kind of found out, I heard my mum shouting at my dad over the phone. This was the day before Christmas Eve... I was really upset but I didn't want to say anything.*

Girl, aged 15,  
1 year since  
separation

*think I would have liked for them to sit down and say, like, what happened and what will happen in the future ... but it kind of just never happened.*

(girl, aged 16, 13 years since separation)

Adolescent children were more likely to express the view that they would like to have been told more about their parents' difficulties before the decision to separate was taken. While they recognised that it might not have been possible for their parents to talk to their children about their relationship difficulties, the children felt that they should have been better prepared for the changes that were to come. As a result, some felt considerable resentment that they had not been told more.

One adolescent girl expressed her anger with her parents when she learned about the separation once the decision had been made. She had a sense that her family life had not been authentic, and felt deceived when she learned of the seriousness of her parents' relationship problems, although she had been aware of some problems between them. Although she would have preferred to have been told about the extent of these problems, she had come to recognise that this is difficult for parents to talk about.

*I felt as though I'd sort of been cheated in a family life that I thought was, and it sort of wasn't at all, like, it's kind of hard to sort of expect for them to sort of say, 'Right, we're having problems' ... I know that's obviously not what can happen, but I just felt a bit sort of cheated. So that's what I was angry about.*

(girl, aged 17, 4 years since separation)

Similarly, one of the adolescent boys felt strongly that he had a right to be told that his parents' difficulties were serious and to be prepared for the impending changes in the family:

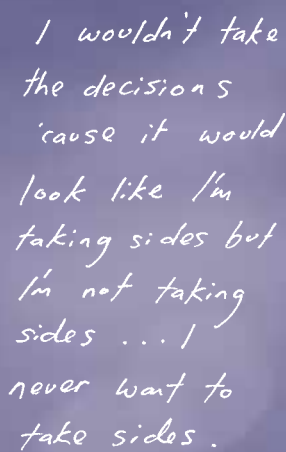
*I [felt angry] because I wasn't told what was, what was happening. Like, my mum knew and ... I thought I had the right to ... know ... even a bit about it ... because I would, would have more time to deal with it.*

(boy, aged 15, 2 years since separation)

At the other extreme, a small number of children felt that they had been inappropriately drawn into their parents' relationship problems. Some had witnessed a great deal of parental conflict and one child avoided being home when both parents were present. One 16-year-old boy, for example, described his role as one of collusion with his mother to help her to leave the family home. Rather than wanting to know more, some children felt that they had been over-exposed to their parents' private interpersonal issues.

### **Communication over time**

It was evident that children's need for clear communication from their parents about family change was an ongoing need, and did not concern only the initial communication of the decision to separate. As the family continued to undergo change, with parents forming new relationships, relocating, or simply planning visits, children valued being kept 'in the picture'. This was part of a more general need to feel involved with their parents' lives, especially those of non-resident parents. Indeed, communication was an important predictor of the quality of children's relationships with their parents, both resident and non-resident, over time (see Chapter 8).



*I wouldn't take  
the decisions  
'cause it would  
look like I'm  
taking sides but  
I'm not taking  
sides ... I  
never want to  
take sides.*

Girl, aged 14,  
5 years  
since separation

### **CHILDREN'S INVOLVEMENT IN DECISION- MAKING ABOUT FAMILY ARRANGEMENTS**

Children were asked whether they had a role in making decisions about new family arrangements when their parents separated. The large majority of children responded that they had simply been told or learned about what the arrangements were to be, and did not play any direct role or feel that they had been consulted about these arrangements. Most said that they did not have a direct involvement in making decisions about custody and access/visiting. These findings are in keeping with the pattern found in other qualitative studies of children and separation or divorce (Fawcett, 1998; Neale & Smart, 1998; Smith & Gollop, 2001).

In contrast to these other studies, however, most of the children in the present sample stated that they did not wish to be consulted or to be involved in family decision making about major issues. This contrasts with other qualitative studies of this kind (McDonald, 1990; Smith & Gollop, 2001), where children have expressed a desire to be consulted to a greater extent about whom they wished to live with and about other arrangements.

Children who had been invited to say what they wanted appreciated this involvement in making decisions about their time with either parent:

*I was asked if I'd like to see me dad and now we go down to him on weekends.*

(girl, aged 14, 4 years since separation)

In almost all of the families, the arrangements for visiting with non-resident parents were formal and regularised, but, in one family, the arrangements were made more flexibly, with children's involvement, on a weekly basis:

*... we organise ourselves; he rings us if he wants to see us, or we ring him or whatever, and we just organise a time.*

(girl, aged 16, 5 years since separation)

Some of the children who had not been consulted expressed their dissatisfaction with this, for example:

*I would have liked to have been asked.*

(girl, aged 10, 5 years since separation)

Children were more likely to be dissatisfied, however, when they were not happy with the formal arrangements that had been decided. In two cases, they eventually forced their parents to take their preferences on board. One girl refused to visit her father at weekends, although a court ordered that her father had access at weekends.

*He came up every Saturday and Sunday. He had to, like ... it says he has to take them out every Saturday ... but he doesn't take me out. I don't go to him because I don't like him. I don't want to.*

(girl, aged 16, 5 years since separation)

Another girl expressed the desire to have reduced contact with her non-resident parent, and to have this wish respected:

*I'd like to have my say instead of ... me ma saying, 'you have to see him'. The only reason I want to see him is to get money off him.*

(girl, aged 15, 1 year since separation)

Only one child, a 9-year-old girl, approached the issue of her involvement in the decision-making process from a rights perspective:

*I remember when the court case was going on, I asked my mummy, 'Why don't they talk to me?' because I was the one that they were fighting over.*

(girl, aged 9, 3 years since separation)

The majority of children were not dissatisfied about these decisions being made by their parents alone, without consultation with them. Many of the children were simply satisfied with the decision that had been made, and therefore saw no reason to be involved.

Many children also took the view that the decisions had been made for practical reasons, with which they largely agreed:

*Well I wasn't able to decide, decide, em, 'cause I was already in the school, you see.*

(girl, aged 10, 2 years since separation)

*I think it was just all assumed that I would live with my mum because he'd been always away, so I suppose it only seemed natural to go with mum. There was no questions really asked, it was just assumed.*

(girl, aged 17, 4 years since separation)

In other cases, practical reasons obviated the possibility of involvement, such as when one parent simply left, thus indicating that they did not wish to have custody of their children, or failed to make contact with children. One adolescent boy, for example, did not see his mother for two years after she left the family home. He had no choice in relation to contact with her since, in his words he

*... didn't see her for two years ... [I] didn't know where she lived.*

(boy, aged 14, 5 years since separation)

*Dad didn't want us, he didn't want us to live with him ... and mum wanted us, and when it came to seeing dad, they never said. They just said, like, you know, dad said, 'I'll come over a lot, you can still see me, you can stay over.' So we just thought, grand, like.*

(girl, aged 14, 5 years since separation)

In addition, some children made it clear that they did not want to be involved in the process of making decisions, preferring their parents to take responsibility, and some saw their parents as making decisions that were in their interests.

One reason for children's reluctance to take part in decision-making was concern about loyalty:

*I wouldn't take the decisions 'cause it would look like I'm taking sides but I'm not taking sides ... I never want to take sides.*

(girl, aged 14, 2 years since separation)

*Because, like, you don't want to take sides because then you feel, like, the other person thinks you love the other, like, let's say I took my mam's side, my dad would probably feel that I loved her more, but I wouldn't.*

(girl, aged 16, 13 years since separation)

Some of the younger children did not want to be involved because they were simply not concerned about playing such a role in the family. In their reflections on the process, immediate issues, such as emotional reactions to loss and separation from parents, and practical considerations, were more important. Involvement may not be as salient an issue generally for younger children, whose identity is based less on abstract notions such as participation.

It is also important to bear in mind that children's interest in influencing the family arrangements may change over time, either with children's increasing capacity or interest in making such decisions, or with changes in their lifestyles, as the following quotes illustrate:

*... when I was small, like, I didn't have the decision because it was just decided, because I couldn't make up my own mind, but then when I was in my 11, 12 and 13, like, I used to go down there myself ... so I did have a decision on it, because if I didn't want to go, I could say I didn't want to go.*

(girl, aged 16, 13 years since separation)

*I found it easier, like, at home with mum, instead of, like, moving back and forth and that sort of thing, and then every Saturday we saw him. And then we decided ourselves, between ourselves, that we would see each other a bit less 'cause we were growing up and we wanted to go out with our friends, instead of spending the day with our dad.*

(girl, aged 16, 6 years since separation)

These comments from children illustrate the complexity of the issue of children's involvement in making decisions about the future of their family and the time that they will spend with either parent.

## DISCUSSION

Children's access to information has been shown to be an important factor in their adaptation to changes in the family following separation or divorce (Dunn & Deater-Deckard, 2001; Fawcett, 1998; Neale & Smart, 1998; Smart, Neale & Wade, 2000), and this is borne out in the present study. Children who did not know what was happening, and did not have the chance to ask questions, were likely to feel confused and worried.

Yet the issue of how much and when to tell children about relationship difficulties between parents is a complex matter. It is a significant challenge for parents, who may themselves be distressed, to decide how much and what kind of information to give to children about their relationship, and the decision that they are coming to, or have recently made. They may be unwilling to share information with children for a number of reasons that are protective of children's interests, including not wishing to draw them into the relationship and its difficulties inappropriately, the belief that children are better served by learning over time, the desire to delay the hurt for children when they come to know that their parents will not live together anymore, and possibly about other hurtful aspects of the separation, such as one parent's relationship with another person, or the sudden and unexplained departure of a parent. Parents may also fail to talk with their children enough about what is happening because they have not given sufficient thought to their children's likely awareness of the difficulties and their worries for the future, or they may typically communicate little with children about matters to do with adults in the family.



CHAPTER 6:  
CHILDREN'S REACTIONS TO  
PARENTAL SEPARATION

adjustment  
stability  
relationship  
security  
CONTACT  
communication  
involvement  
family

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents children's descriptions of their reactions to their parents' separation, including their initial emotional reactions and their feelings and perspectives. It is important to bear in mind that this research allows for only a snapshot of children's lives. This is illustrated in the comment of a 14-year-old girl, who said that she sometimes felt happy about her parents' separation, but that '... it depends, like, on how the day went'.

## INITIAL REACTIONS

One of the most common reactions to learning that their parents would separate initially was surprise or shock, even when children were aware that their parents had inter-personal difficulties. This was followed by periods in which many children came to understand the implications of what was happening, and this varied in length of time from child to child.

*[It was] the biggest shock of my life.*

(girl, aged 14, 1 year since separation)

*It was kind of like someone had died or something like that. It was kind of like ... he's not there anymore. A pain in the head.*

(boy, aged 15, 5 years since separation)

*For the first day or two, it didn't really hit me, like, what happened. And I just went ... about normally, like, as normal as I could. And then I realised, like it's going to change everything ... like, everything will change eventually.*

(boy, aged 15, 2 years since separation)

Several children felt that they were different now from other children, and that their family was different from other families. They compared themselves negatively with children whose parents were not separated:

*When your ma and da get separated you are real paranoid. You know, everywhere you look you can see these mas and das and all. And you think they're real happy and all.*

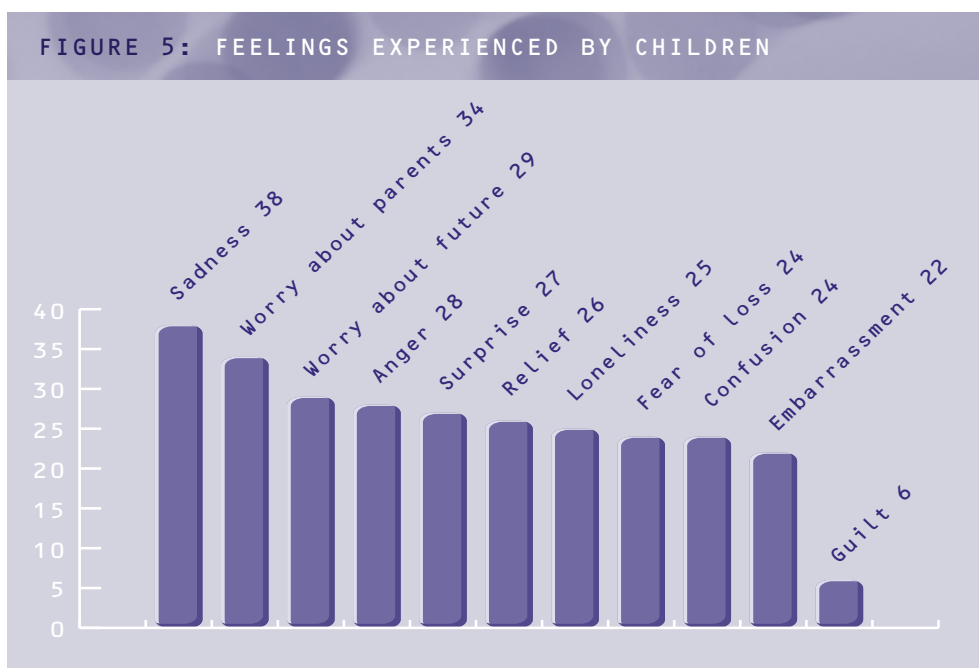
(girl, aged 17, 4 years since separation)

*It would wreck your head sometimes, seeing other people, like, when other people would be there and their parents get on great, like. You see, when your parents get on great, everything else is great.*

(boy, aged 16, 1 year since separation)

## CHILDREN'S FEELINGS

Children reacted to their parent's separation with a mix of positive and negative feelings, often felt simultaneously.



### ***Feeling sad and upset***

The most common feeling reported by children was sadness, which 38 children (63%) reported feeling in relation to their parents' separation. Children described the events surrounding the separation as upsetting and, while some adapted to the changes that ensued, many continued to have great difficulty with the absence of one parent from the home.

*I think it is a very emotional time for the kids, more than it is for parents ... it was a very upsetting time ... when he moved out it was ... heartbreaking for me and [my sister] ... but then after a while we got used to it ... he'd come up, we'd visit and all.*  
(girl, aged 14, 4 years since separation)

Some of the older children, in particular, struggled with their inability to control what was happening, and with having to accept the implications of their parents' decision.

*I probably would have preferred if I could see both of them all the time ... but I know that wasn't possible because they couldn't live together.*  
(girl, aged 16, 13 years since separation)

It is important to bear in mind that the separation was not a source of upset or intense sadness for all children, and also that, for some, the initial sadness had passed.

*I don't feel sad, I just, like, I mean sometimes when I think of it, I might feel sad, but otherwise I'm fine.*

(boy, aged 13, 2 years since separation)

*I just knew it was for the best.*

(boy, aged 15, 2 years since separation)

*... but then just glad he was gone because there was no fighting in the family ... because no more shouting and all that, a bit of peace.*

Boy, aged 16,  
10 years since  
separation

### **Feeling relief**

Almost half of the children (26, 43%) reported having had feelings of relief when their parents separated, and these feelings mostly related to the distress that children had felt about conflict between their parents.

*They used to fight a lot and now it's quieter.*

(girl, aged 15, 1 year since separation)

*Yeah [I felt relieved] ... 'cause I'd never want one of my parents to live a lie.*

(girl, aged 14, 1 year since separation)

For some children the sense of relief was connected with clarification about the implications of the difficulties between their parents. When they were told that their parents had made the decision to separate, they felt a sense of relief that they now knew what would happen.

*Yeah I feel a bit of relief because I know, like, exactly what's happening and ... ehm ... and what everything is, like.*

(girl, aged 14, 4 years since separation)

It was also common for children to feel a mixture of sadness and relief. One adolescent boy explained that he was 'kind of sad' when his father left, and yet relieved:

*... but then just glad he was gone because there was no fighting in the family ... because no more shouting and all that, a bit of peace.*

(boy, aged 16, 10 years since separation)

The absence of fighting in the home also appeared to help children to feel more comfortable in their own homes following the separation, as they felt that the conflict had been resolved, at least to some extent.

### **Feeling worried**

Most of the children reported feeling worried, either about the future of the family, their own future in the aftermath of the separation, or specifically about one or both of their parents. Thirty-four children (57%) reported feeling worried about one or both of their parents. Children worried about their parents becoming upset, about them being unhappy with their lives, and about them being unwell. Both younger and older children were very sensitive to the problems their parents were experiencing, and spoke of not wanting to cause their parents any further distress or anxiety.

*But now it's much better that we can actually talk to each other and I can ask her questions. But I can't ask her too many questions 'cause I know what the limit is for her to get upset over.*

(girl, aged 14, 4 years since separation)

One child's sense of relief was related to his reduced worries about his mother, now that she had established a new household for herself.

*Mam's got a better life now ... it's a load off my mind too, you know.*

(boy, aged 16, 1 year since separation)

Worry was also sometimes related to children's expectations about what might happen in the future in their family, in terms of new partners or children, as this young girl's account of her concerns illustrates:

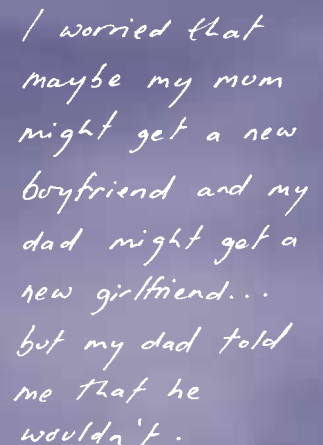
*I worried that maybe my mum might get a new boyfriend and my dad might get a new girlfriend ... but my dad told me that he wouldn't.*

(girl, aged 9, 2 years since separation)

In some cases, children's worries were connected, not to the separation *per se*, but to their parents' wellness, either physical or psychological.

*A while ago I used to think an awful lot about death with me da 'cause he took tablets.*

(girl, aged 10, 5 years since separation)



*I worried that maybe my mum might get a new boyfriend and my dad might get a new girlfriend... but my dad told me that he wouldn't.*

Girl, aged 9,  
2 years since  
separation

In addition, some children's worries were related to substance abuse and/or domestic violence in the family. This issue is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 10. Children also worried, or had worried in the past, about losing contact with non-resident parents, and this was reflected in their reports that they had experienced a fear of loss (24, or 40% of children).

It is important to note that several children were concerned about the strain that the separation process had placed on their parents, and they pointed to their parents' need for support.

*Mum is very good at hiding things, so she kind of kept it going like normal. She kept taking us places ... If she'd been, like, real upset, it would have made it harder for us, much harder.*

(girl, aged 14, 5 years since separation)

*I feel angry about what's happened, but not at them.*

Boy, aged 13,  
2 years  
since separation

### **Feeling anger**

Almost half of the children (28, 47%) stated that they had felt angry when their parents had decided to separate, although these feelings tended to dissipate over time, especially where communication between parents and children was good, or because children had adapted and gained greater understanding over time.

*I did [feel angry], but I'm okay now because my dad talks to me more about it.*

(girl, aged 15, 1 year since separation)

One adolescent boy distinguished between anger that is general, and anger that is directed towards parents.

*I feel angry about what's happened, but not at them.*

(boy, aged 13, 2 years since separation)

*Oh definitely ... I used to try and make it out that it isn't his fault ... in my head ... but I know now it is and ... [pause] ... he can't change who he is.*

(girl, aged 14, 1 year since separation)

### **Feeling confusion**

Twenty-four children (40%) said that they had experienced feelings of confusion in connection with their parents' separation. Feelings of confusion arose for children prior to

the separation when they did not know what would happen between their parents, and/ or while at the time of and after the separation when they did not understand what was happening. Lack of open communication in the family appeared to account for this confusion in most cases. One child felt confused because she had received different accounts of what was happening from each parent.

*My mum tells me one thing and my dad tells me the other. I do feel confused, yes.*

(girl, aged 15, 1 year since separation)

For some children, the sense of confusion was connected with trying to sort out their own feelings. One teenage girl was confused about how to deal with her desire to live with her father and her reluctance to appear to be disloyal to her mother:

*Yeah, I was very confused ... I didn't know what I wanted. Like, I knew I wanted my dad but I also didn't want to take sides.*

(girl, aged 14, 1 year since separation)

### **Feeling embarrassment**

More than one-third of children (22, 37%) reported that they had felt embarrassed about their parents' separation. Embarrassment did not have a notable impact on the behaviour of some children:

*Well, I didn't really want to tell many people but I did. Like, I wouldn't go out of my way to tell people I was separated.*

(girl, aged 16, 5 years since separation)

For others, however, it was a key impediment to their willingness to talk to other people and to seek or accept support. This issue is addressed in greater depth in Chapter 9, in relation to coping and support.

### **Feeling loneliness**

Twenty-five children, or 42%, reported that the separation had been associated with some feelings of loneliness for them, and these feelings were typically associated with a sense of the absence of their non-resident parent from their daily routines.

*Lately it has really hit me that my dad doesn't come home ... 'round about 7 o'clock.*

(girl, aged 14, 1 year since separation)

In addition to these largely negative feelings, some children reported feeling happier since the separation, but it was not possible in many cases to tell whether their happiness related to the separation itself and its consequences, or to other factors.

These findings illustrate the range of emotions that children may experience in response to their parents' separation, and the varied reasons for these different feelings over time. The findings serve to illustrate that there is no single or universal response to parental separation, that apparently contradictory feelings may be held simultaneously, and that children's feelings may change over time. Yet it is important to take on board the implications of the findings presented here, and particularly findings that point to new information about the nature of children's responses. The extent to which children experience worry, on a number of different fronts, is notable, especially given that it is reported by children as young as age eight.

## CHILDREN'S VIEWS ABOUT PARENTAL SEPARATION

Fourteen girls and five boys in the older age group responded to a question about their views on parental separation and their views were mixed, some reflecting their views on their own circumstances, while others responded more generally. Several children thought of separation in positive terms:

*Well I think people make mistakes and they should have a chance to start again.*

(girl, aged 16, 5 years since separation)

*It's just, like, probably normal and I think it's better to separate if you're not in a loving marriage than to stay together and, like, then that takes it out, like, if you have children, then they recognise, like, like, the fighting and all, so it isn't good on them.*

(girl, aged 16, 13 years since separation)

*In my situation, it's a good thing.*

(girl, aged 15, 1 year since separation)

*It's ... the fact that you have to put up with not being with your ma, like ... So, like, it's real hurtful as well, you know what I mean.*

Girl, aged 13,  
4 years since  
separation



Other children, however, expressed negative views about their parents' separation.

*It's just stupid, I think ... 'cause it's stupid that your ma and da leave and there's no one else in the family, like. 'Cause, say me da and ma leave, then me, the rest say the kids are put up for adoption.*

(girl, aged 13, 3 years since separation)

*It's ... the fact that you have to put up with not being with your ma, like ... So, like, it's real hurtful as well, you know what I mean.*

(girl, aged 13, 4 years since separation)

A number of children thought of separation in both negative and positive terms, often depending on the individual circumstances, but generally agreed that it was the best solution when parents could not get along with each other:

*It's ... good ... for ... people that it should happen to because ... ehm ... it's not good at the time but you'll actually realise it after a while that it is good but it is hard and it's not a nice thing to go through ... but, like, I would never wish it on anybody.*

(girl, aged 14, 4 years since separation)

*It depends what the situation is ... Like in our case it was good 'cause, like, we all came closer together, there was no arguing anymore, but, like, if, it depends on the parents.*

(girl, aged 14, 5 years since separation)

*Some people don't like people being separated ... I didn't like the idea of me mam and dad getting separated but you have to get used to it. You just can't just expect two people that don't love each other or like each other ... there would be war every day.*

(girl, aged 14, 5 years since separation)

On balance, these views tended to be in favour of separation, if ongoing conflict between parents was the alternative:

**C:** *It can be good because it makes them, sometimes makes them happier if they don't want to be with each other ... but it's bad for everyone around them ...*

**R:** *Imagine your parents kept on fighting and they weren't going to separate, how would you feel about that?*

**C:** *I wouldn't like that ... it's better that they separate so they don't have to argue all the time.*

(girl, aged 15, 1 year since separation)

*For me it's a good thing ... 'cause I don't have to listen to them fighting no more.*

(boy, aged 14, 3 years since separation)

## CHILDREN'S EXPECTATIONS REGARDING THEIR PARENTS' SEPARATION

### *Expectations about whether the separation was temporary or permanent*

More than two-thirds of the children, spread equally across both younger and older age groups, at the time of interview, stated that they believed that their parents' separation was permanent.

*My mum won't go back to my dad ... she's made it clear that she won't.*

(girl, aged 15, 1 year since separation)

Only one younger boy believed that his parents' separation was temporary, while one girl felt unsure whether her parents would get back together. Boys were more likely than girls to have believed the separation to be permanent from the beginning, and to retain that view over time. A considerable number of other children (13 girls and 3 boys) had changed their expectations over time.

*At first I thought [the separation] was a little time, and ... now I know they're never going to get back.*

(girl, aged 9, 7 years since separation)

*I thought it was actually going to be, like, short ... but then after a couple of weeks I realised it was going to be a long time.*

(girl, aged 14, 4 years since separation)

The realisation that the change was more than merely a temporary arrangement came to some children as they grew older and were better able to grasp the implications of what was happening:

*I think I kind of, maybe when I was smaller, wished that it was only temporary but then as I was growing up ... I realised that it was permanent because he didn't live with us.*

(girl, aged 16, 13 years since separation)

Others came to view the possibility of their parents getting back together as less likely, or impossible, as they observed their behaviour towards each other:

**R:** *Okay, did you think ... at the time, did you think that it was going to be temporary or permanent?*

**C:** *I thought it was going to be temporary, I always thought they might get back together, maybe, they were kinda in love, maybe for the sake of us as well.*

**R:** *Okay, and now what do you think?*

**C:** *No chance of them getting back together.*

**R:** *When did you become aware of that, or how did you become aware of that?*

**C:** *Just ... they didn't try to get back together, they just became more removed, they didn't try after that, and it didn't happen in the very beginning.*

(boy, aged 10, 5 years since separation)

One of the younger boys realised that the separation was permanent after his parents became divorced:

*When I found out about the divorce I knew it was going to be forever.*

(boy, aged 10, 8 years since separation)<sup>2</sup>

Some children realised that the separation was going to be permanent when they saw no evidence that their parents would reconcile, when a parent who had left the home remained absent and out of contact, or when they saw parents begin to form relationships with new partners and even to have children in their new families.

*At first I thought  
(the separation)  
was a little time,  
and ... now I know  
they're never going  
to get back.*

Girl, aged 9,  
7 years since  
separation

### ***Children's expectations regarding custody***

Half of the children in the sample told us about the expectations they held about custody arrangements at the time of their parents' separation, thirteen in the younger age group and seventeen in the older age group. This appeared to be an issue about which there was little confusion or uncertainty.

All but one of the children, a girl in the younger age group, said that they had been certain from the beginning, and knew straight away, that they would live with their mothers. The only exception was a girl who had been unsure as to which parent she might live with, but she had thought it would probably be her mother, as '*mums usually get them*' (girl, aged 11). On the whole, it appeared that these children simply assumed that they would live with their mothers, and this was borne out. In the older age group of children, the majority also felt this certainty about their future living arrangements, particularly in families where the decisions about custody had been communicated to the child immediately, or the children were involved directly in the decision-making.

*I knew straight away that I would be living with my dad because I wanted to live with my dad.*

(girl, aged 14, 4 years since separation)

---

2 It was not possible for us to reliably gather information on the legal status of the parents' relationship, and therefore we cannot determine how many of the parents were divorced. Our estimate is that the numbers were low, probably less than 10% of the sample.

Three children continued to believe that living with their mother was inevitable because this was the norm:

*C: Because all the kids always live with their mas.*

*R: Okay.*

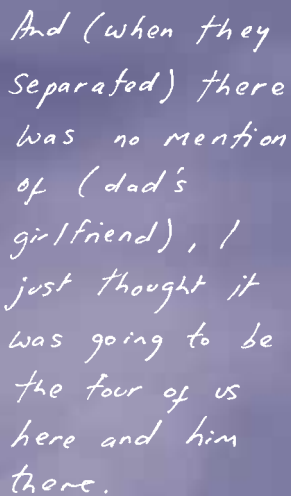
*C: Not their das.*

*R: Why do you think that is?*

*C: Don't know. You're more attached to your ma than you are to your da.*

(girl, aged 13, 3 years since separation)

It is important to note that while, in the main, children indicated clarity about custody, not all children were satisfied with the arrangements that were made, or the extent to which they were consulted about this issue.



*And (when they separated) there was no mention of (dad's girlfriend), I just thought it was going to be the four of us here and him there.*

Girl, aged 14,  
5 years since  
separation

### ***Expectations about the future composition of the family***

More than two-thirds of the children in the sample discussed their perspectives on what was likely to happen in their family in the future, in terms of family composition, and particularly about the possibility of new family members.

There were some differences in views on this issue between the age groups, perhaps because the parents of children in the older age group were more likely to have separated earlier, and therefore it was more likely that such changes had already taken place. Of the seventeen children who discussed this issue in the older group, nine indicated that at least one of their parents already had new partners. In the younger age group, four children indicated the presence of new family members. In the older group, however, seven children (whose parents did not have new partners) believed that there would be no change in family composition in the future. Among those where such change had occurred, two children indicated that it had been unexpected:

*R: When your parents separated, did you think your mother or father might get involved with another person?*

*C: No, never. 'Cause me ma said she'd never have another man again and she did then.*

(girl, aged 16, 5 years since separation)

*And [when they separated] there was no mention of [dad's girlfriend], I just thought it was going to be the four of us here and him there.*

(girl, aged 14, 5 years since separation)

Among the younger children, there was a stronger sense that the family would remain unchanged. Eight girls and five boys said that their families would remain the same:

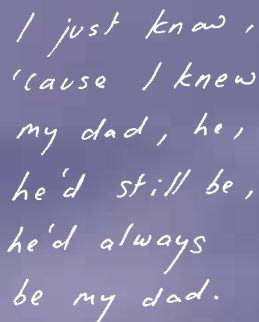
*Me ma wouldn't let anybody else move in, like, you know, wouldn't have another baby or anything.*

(girl, aged 10, 1 year since separation)

A small number of young children spoke about their awareness of the possibility of a new partner. One child, in addition, mentioned the possibility that his mother might have another baby some day. Some had different expectations for their parents, believing that one might form a new relationship, while the other would not:

*No, my mum won't marry someone else but my dad might.*

(girl, aged 9, 3 years since separation)



*I just know,  
'cause I knew  
my dad, he,  
he'd still be,  
he'd always  
be my dad.*

Boy, aged 13,  
2 years since  
separation

Some children were concerned about new family members and others were not. Some had already experienced getting to know, and coming to terms with the reality of, a parent's new partner. Indeed, a number of children had been surprised to find that they liked and enjoyed a parent's new partner. In other cases, they had not liked them and felt some resentment and anxiety about the implications of these new partnerships for the time that they spend with their parents and their relationships with them.

#### ***Children's expectations about whether parents would continue in the parenting role***

Children were, for the most part, quite confident that their parents would continue to be their parents after the separation. In the younger group, only three children (all girls) expressed some concerns in this respect, and one of these was in connection with new partners:

*I worried that maybe my mum might get a new boyfriend and my dad might get a new girlfriend ...*

(girl, aged 9, 2 years since separation)

In the older age group, 27 children gave their views on this issue. As with the younger children, none of the boys expressed any concerns in this regard, while a small number of girls had some uncertainty. One girl pointed out that even when her mother had a new partner, her father remained her father. Parents were perceived to play an important role in giving reassurances that they would continue in the parenting role in spite of the separation.

*I think that was one of the things they said, like, 'we'll always be here,' you know, 'he's still your dad, I'm still your mum,' or whatever.*

(girl, aged 16, 5 years since separation)

Children also tended to base their expectations on their previous experiences and knowledge of parents, so that those who had positive expectations were invariably children who had a close and trusting relationship with parents prior to the separation.

*I just know, 'cause I knew my dad, he, he'd still be, he'd always be my dad.*

(boy, aged 13, 2 years since separation)

## DISCUSSION

There was evidence of mixed reactions among children about their parents' separation, reflecting the variation in children's lives and family circumstances. It was common for children to be shocked about the separation, at least initially, and to experience some difficulties in coming to terms with the changes that followed. Yet the feelings children experienced were often a mix of positive and negative; sadness and relief, worry about loss and confidence about stability and continuity in some areas. Their expectations about how the family would develop were also mixed, with some children expressing a certainty about care-giving arrangements and residence, and yet there was a theme of concern about what the future might hold, once it appeared possible, and even likely, that there would be further changes ahead, such as new family members. Children's views often changed over time, both in positive and negative directions; some, for example, were pleasantly surprised to find themselves liking and accepting parents' new partners, while others were distressed about these unexpected developments. Some were affirmed in their expectation that their non-resident parent would continue to be actively involved in their lives without a significant change in role, notwithstanding the changes in living arrangements, while others were profoundly disappointed by the loss of contact with parents, and found it difficult or impossible to accept the loss. The findings highlight the changing meaning of parental separation for children over time, as they change themselves, and as new changes emerge with the ongoing development of the family.

CHAPTER 7: CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES  
OF PRACTICAL AND SOCIAL CHANGES  
FOLLOWING PARENTAL SEPARATION

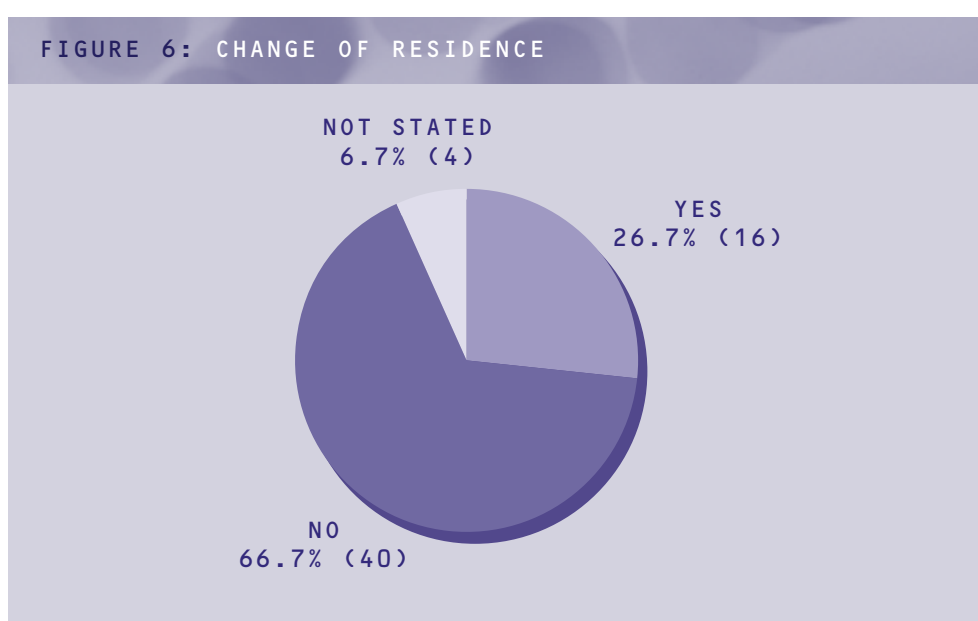
adjustment  
stability  
relationship  
security  
contact  
communication  
involvement  
family

## INTRODUCTION

Parental separation may affect many areas of life for all family members. In the present study, children were asked to describe both change and continuity they may have experienced in relation to where they lived and attended school, as well as any impact on arrangements for care-giving and for daily family routine. In this chapter, we present findings regarding change and continuity in residence, school and care-giving. We also report on children's contact and visiting arrangements with their non-resident parents, and on their contact with their extended families.

## CHANGE OF RESIDENCE

Only a small number of children moved house, as Figure 6 illustrates.



Most children continued to live in their family homes with their mothers. Table 3 shows that younger children were twice as likely as older children to have moved house – 37% (11) of younger children were known to have changed residence compared to 17% (5) of older children.



**TABLE 3: CHANGE OF RESIDENCE BY AGE GROUP OF CHILDREN**

Change of residence	Age group of children		Total across age groups
	Younger (8-11)	Older (13-17)	
Yes	37% (11)	17% (5)	26.7% (16)
No	53% (16)	80% (24)	66.6% (40)
Not stated	10% (3)	3% (1)	6.7% (4)
Sum	100% (30)	100% (30)	100.0% (60)

For those who moved house, this change was important, and one to which some children had considerable difficulty adjusting. One ten year old boy was still distressed, after two years, about having had to move to an adjacent community and to a smaller house. He had not changed schools, but one large road separated his old neighbourhood from the new one and he found this difficult:

*Because it was a big house and I liked all the friends I had and ... there were lots of things to do.*

(boy, aged 10, 4 years since separation)

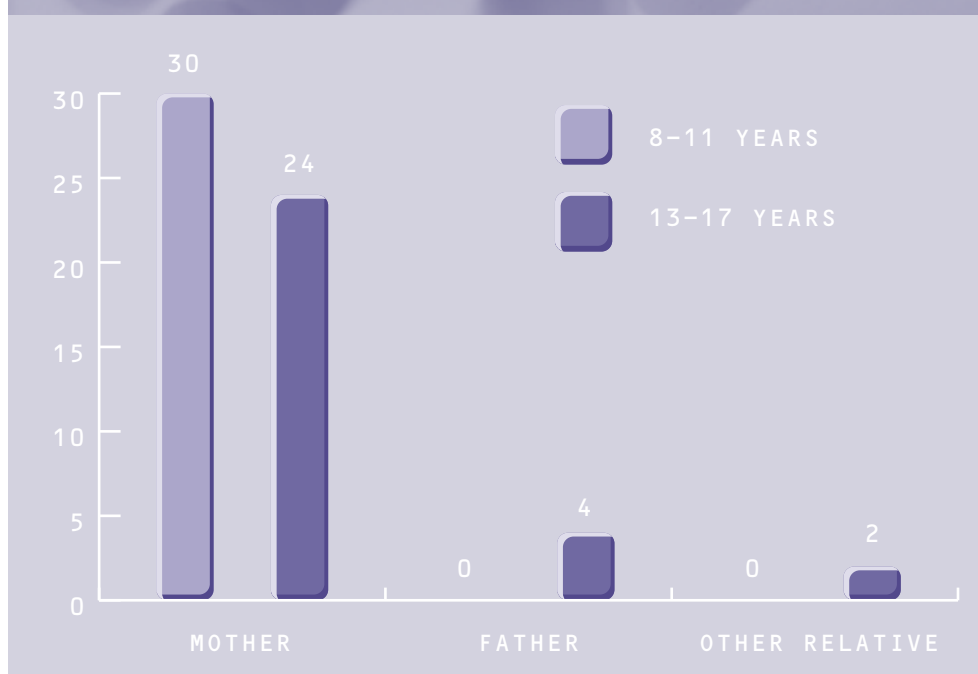
A small number of children not only moved house, but also relocated to a different part of the country, leaving behind school and friends. Another child moved away to live in a boys' residential home for some time, before moving to live with his aunt. These moves had significance for children's friendship networks and for their contact with non-resident parents and grandparents. In the present sample, however, most of the changes were within the locality or city, and many were not associated with changes in school.

It was unusual for fathers to be the resident parent, occurring in only four families (7%). All thirty of the younger children had their mother as the resident parent. Most of the children in the older age group, 24 (80%), also had their mother as the resident parent, while 4 (13.3%) resided with their father and 2 (6.7%) lived with another relative (in both cases, an aunt). Table 4 shows the resident parent for the younger and older age groups of children interviewed.

**TABLE 4: RESIDENT PARENT BY AGE GROUP**

	Younger age group (8-11 years) % (n)	Older age group (13-17 years) % (n)	Total % (n)
Mother	100.0 (30)	80.0 (24)	90.0 (54)
Father	- -	13.3 (4)	6.7 (4)
Other relative	- -	6.7 (2)	3.3 (2)
Total	50.0 (30)	50.0 (30)	100.0 (60)

**FIGURE 7: RESIDENT PARENT FOR EACH AGE GROUP**



## CHANGE OF SCHOOL

A very small number of children was known to have changed school and they all belonged to the younger age group (8-11 years) – 10% (3) of younger children had changed school compared to none of the older children, as Table 5 shows.

**TABLE 5: CHANGE OF SCHOOL BY AGE GROUP OF CHILDREN**

<i>Change of school</i>	<i>Age group of children</i>		<i>Total across age groups</i>
	<i>Younger (8-11)</i>	<i>Older (13-17)</i>	
Yes	10% (3)	-	5% (3)
No	70% (21)	93% (28)	82% (49)
Information not available	20% (6)	7% (2)	13% (8)
<b>Sum</b>	100% (30)	100% (30)	100% (52)

### **PATTERNS OF CONTACT WITH NON-RESIDENT PARENTS**

The patterns of contact between children and their non-resident parents varied, as can be seen in Table 6. It is notable, however, that more than two-thirds of the children said that they had contact with their non-resident parent at least once per week; 30% once per week and 38.3% more than once per week. Three children (5%) said that they saw their non-resident parent approximately once a month, seven (12%) on several occasions during each year, and, in one case, only once per year. Six children (10%) said that they had no contact with their non-resident parent. There were few differences in patterns of contact for the younger and older age groups of children, and there was no clear evidence of a pattern of declining contact with the passing of years since the separation.

The pattern of contact for the present sample is similar to the pattern reported by Fawcett (1998), where 67% of her sample of 37 teenagers in Northern Ireland had weekly contact arrangements, and only 11% reported no contact at all. She points out that her findings reflect significantly higher levels of contact compared with the findings of another study in Northern Ireland, where there was no contact with the non-resident parents in over half of the sample of children (McCoy & Nelson, 1983). It also contrasts with the lower levels of contact reported in international studies (Seltzer, 1991; Simpson, McCarthy & Walker, 1995).

**TABLE 6: CONTACT WITH NON-RESIDENT PARENT**

	No.	%
No contact	6	10.0
1 visit per year	1	1.7
Several visits per year	7	11.7
1 visit per month	3	5.0
1 visit per week	18	30.0
More than 1 visit per week	23	38.3
Not applicable <sup>3</sup>	2	3.3
Total	60	100.0

In the present sample, the arrangements tended to be quite regulated, in that visits were scheduled and children had clear expectations regarding access.

### ***Factors facilitating contact***

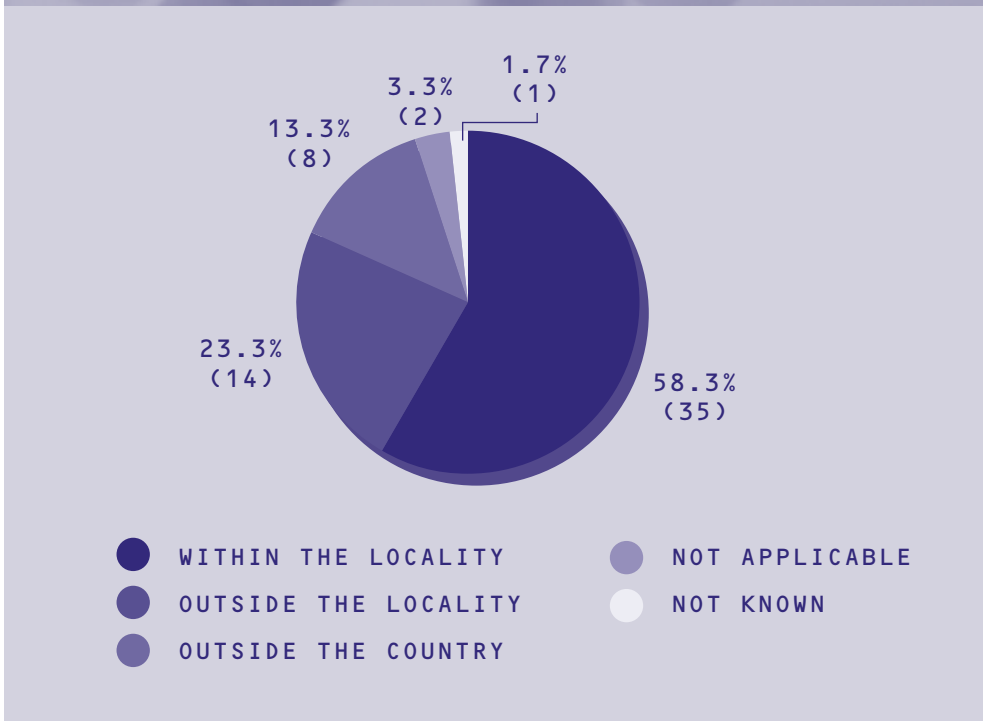
In many cases, all family members continued to live in or around the same area, and this facilitated continued regular contact. The high levels of contact in the present sample may be explained, at least in part, by the geographical location of non-resident parents, as 35 (58%) lived within the same area (the same locality, or city), while fourteen (23%) were living within the country. A further eight (13%) were living outside the country and, in these families, children tended to see their non-resident parent less frequently (see Figure 8).

Although, in some families, either fathers, or mothers with children, relocated to other regions of the country or to the UK, following the separation, in many cases children travelled regularly to visit their non-resident parent and were, for the most part, satisfied with this arrangement. For some children who commuted regularly (weekly) within Ireland, the travelling was something of a strain, but children saw it as necessary to afford them the time with their parent, and did not wish to change the arrangement, as that might mean a decrease in contact with that parent.

---

<sup>3</sup> Two of the children lived with relatives other than their parents, and therefore neither parent can be considered to be 'resident' or 'non-resident'.

FIGURE 8: LOCATION OF NON-RESIDENT PARENT



**Children’s perspectives on contact with non-resident parents**

Typically children perceived these arrangements as working well, in that contact with the non-resident parent was regular and not subject to disappointing cancellations in most cases.

R: *Okay. So you see [your dad] at least twice a week usually?*

C: *Twice a week ... it has to be twice a week.*

R: *Okay.*

C: *He wouldn’t give up on it.*

(girl, aged 9, 7 years since separation)

For other children, however, the contact arrangements were not so straightforward or satisfactory. Two children were particularly concerned with the arrangements for seeing their father on holiday occasions<sup>4</sup>.

*We’re never going to see my dad on Christmas, only Christmas Eve.*

(girl, aged 11, 2 years since separation)

4 Some interviews took place directly before Christmas

Another 10 year-old boy (2 years since separation) said that he was happy with the actual arrangement to see his dad every weekend and Mondays and Thursdays, but appeared disappointed and confused that in fact he rarely saw him on weekends. Although he was happy to be living with his mother, and said he 'sees why' he has to live with her, he also wants to live with his father, saying towards the end of the interview, 'I'd prefer to be with my dad really'.

One child was clearly grieving for the loss of her father, with whom she had no contact.

*C: Me mam doesn't miss him, like, I miss him a lot and I can't stop missing him.*

*R: But you do see him don't you, do you see him on Fridays?*

*C: No, not any more because he's working.*

*R: Okay.*

*C: All those weeks and years and days he's gone.*

[Later in the interview]

*C: I prefer... me mammy and ... daddy living together instead of just ... they're breaking ... just breaking.*

(girl, aged 8, 2 years since separation)

While children's experience of contact with non-resident parents varied, the importance to the children of maintaining contact was very evident. This had a bearing on their overall response to the separation, and their perspectives on how their lives had been affected. Children who experienced a sense of losing contact, or for whom there was no contact with their fathers, were markedly unhappy, and in some cases distressed. It appeared that children could accept the separation, and even find it to be positive for their family, if positive contact with non-resident parents could be sustained.

In addition to expressing the importance of continued contact with parents, children showed, through their narratives about their own experiences, high levels of awareness of the potential for how their own behaviour in relation to contact could affect their parents. They were especially concerned with issues of fairness and of equal treatment of their parents. Above all, they were concerned that they might hurt their parents' feelings, and strove to protect them from being hurt, even if this meant not being truthful about their wishes.

*C: I see my dad on Sundays and sometimes I get upset because I think I'll hurt my dad's feelings when I can't see him or something. I always try to.*

*R: Okay, 'cause sometimes you can't see him.*

*C: Yeah, 'cause I have something on and I really want to go to it.*

(girl, aged 9, 4 years since separation)

When children were not happy with these arrangements, there was usually one of the following factors at play:

- The separation took place suddenly, with one of the partners leaving unexpectedly
- Children did not have a clear sense of what was going on
- Children worried about the welfare of the non-resident parent
- Children had the sense that they were not a priority for their non-resident parent

### CARE-GIVING

All of the younger children continued to live with their mothers following the separation, and there was little or no change in the primary source of care-giving for these children. In many families, while children said that their fathers had previously been quite involved with childcare, they perceived their mothers as being their main caregiver, and this perception seemed to influence the view of many children that this was the only realistic option. Some younger children expressed the view that only their mothers had the capacity to provide the care they needed. One 9-year-old girl stated that she was certain that she wanted to live with her mother

*... because my dad couldn't really ... my dad can't even dress me. When I was small he used to put on my pyjamas back-to-front.*

(girl, aged 9, 4 years since separation)

The majority of older children (12 girls and 8 boys) described little or no change in care-giving by parents since the separation. For most of these young people, their mother had been the primary caregiver before the separation, in terms of looking after them on a daily basis, preparing meals, and bringing them to school, and this continued to be the case after the separation. However, a number of children pointed out that their fathers had quite actively contributed to their care-giving while they lived with them. Many of the children were sensitive to the fact that their father's absence was, therefore, a source of additional pressure on their mothers. Indeed, some children pointed to changes in daily life as being difficult, but not so much for them personally as for their mothers. One 10-year-old boy, for example, felt that his mother was under more pressure now, with the sole care of three children.

**C:** *[After the separation] ... we did a lot more work like setting the table and ... there was more pressure on my mum.*

**R:** *How did you know that?*

*I see my dad on Sundays and sometimes I get upset because I think I'll hurt my dad's feelings when I can't see him or something. I always try to.*

Girl, aged 9,  
4 years since  
separation

*C: Well, my dad could calm her down and he'd be able to ... like, sometimes my mum couldn't get Aoife dressed and me and Meabh<sup>5</sup> were downstairs and my dad could make us our cereal and help us.*

(boy, aged 10, 4 years since separation)

This child pointed out that this pressure on his mother affected him indirectly, since he felt that his relationships with her had suffered as a result of her having less time and feeling under strain.

Many of the older children described wanting to help out more in the house and this seemed to be the case for boys as well as for girls. None of these children appeared to find this a burden. On the contrary, they seemed to be happy to be able to support their resident parent in this way. There had been more changes to care-giving in the older age group. Five girls and four boys described a change in their primary care-giver since the separation. For one adolescent boy, this change was due to the fact that he had lived with his aunt and uncle since his parents had separated, and they were his main care-givers at the time of interview.

Four children were living with their fathers (2 girls and 2 boys). These children tended to worry about their fathers and appeared to have taken on a substantial amount of extra work in the home. One of the older boys who lived with his father described his efforts to lessen the burden on his father by trying to keep the house clean:

*[I] make sure the place is clean ... so he won't have to do it when he comes in.*

(boy, aged 14, 5 years since separation)

Overall, it appeared that children experienced a good deal of continuity in terms of care-giving; their mothers had previously been their main care-givers and this continued to be the case. In some cases, mothers began to work outside the home, and several children mentioned that money was less available than previously. Several children demonstrated awareness of an additional burden being placed on resident parents, both mothers and fathers, when they took complete responsibility for care-giving, effectively living as single parents.

## CONTACT WITH EXTENDED FAMILY

There was striking continuity in children's contact with their extended families among children in this study, even when parents' relationships continued to be acrimonious. Children who tended to spend a good deal of time with grandparents, aunts and uncles prior to the separation continued to do so afterwards, generally on both sides of the family.

Only two of the younger children reported any significant change in the nature of their involvement or contact with their extended families on the side of the non-resident parents.

---

5 Children's real names have been changed to protect anonymity.



Among the children in the older age group, contact also continued to be much as it had been prior to the separation, although some children found that, as they grew older, they saw less of their relatives, since their own lives became busier. There was a small number of exceptions, where children were notably unhappy with the change in the relationship following the separation. One child, who was living with her father, said that her uncle (her mother's brother) 'changed totally towards us', while another child described being hurt that her father's mother refused to talk to her mother.

*'Cause I was  
always upset  
and sad. I  
used to be  
crying... If,  
like, a teacher  
said 'boo' to  
me or anything  
I'd start to  
cry.*

Girl, aged 16,  
5 years since  
separation

There were some changes in terms of children seeing more of their relatives, perhaps because they were an important source of support for their parents, who themselves spent more time with close relatives following the separation. In several families, fathers had returned to live with their own parents following the separation, and children stayed overnight while visiting their fathers. In one family, even though the child had less frequent contact with his father, his contact with his grandparents continued to be frequent.

This largely positive picture of continuity in relationships with relatives following parental separation may be partly explained by the following: some fathers moved back in with their own parents (or to their original community); children spent a good deal of time regularly with their fathers, and some of that time was spent visiting relatives; parents tended to live within manageable distance from each other, and also many families had originally lived within reasonable distance of their own families of origin, so continuing to visit grandparents, for example, was not a great additional burden for parents.

## IMPACT ON SCHOOL WORK

Previous research on the impact of parental separation or divorce on children's school performance or educational attainment has produced mixed findings (Rodgers & Pryor, 2001), and there are indications that some of the problems reported in correlational studies may have, in fact, been present prior to the separation (Elliot & Richards, 1991). In the present study, children were asked to reflect on whether, and if so how, the separation had affected their school work. In the younger age group, twenty of the children, or one-third of the total, stated that the separation had no negative impact on their schoolwork. Six children, all girls, reported a negative impact. In two of these cases, the problems related to difficulties in concentration, relating to their preoccupation with worry about the home situation.

In the older age group, six children – five girls and one boy – said that they had experienced difficulties with their school work due to the separation. Often their teachers were not aware of the separation.

*I couldn't concentrate properly in school. The teachers was doing me head in ... then I wanted to go home ... because sometimes in the class I just wanted to sit back and think about it and I can't.*

(girl, aged 15, 1 year since separation)

One girl said that, while her school work had not suffered, she had experienced emotional difficulties that were displayed in school:

*'Cause I was always upset and sad. I used to be crying ... if, like, a teacher said 'boo' to me or anything I'd start to cry.*

(girl, aged 16, 5 years since separation)

School difficulties, either academic or social, were more likely to occur when the separation was recent, suggesting the need for greater support at this time in the transition. There was evidence that children became better able to manage school work over time, as they adjusted to the separation.

## DISCUSSION

In general, children said that they experienced quite high degrees of continuity in their everyday lives, in terms of where they lived and went to school, and the main source of care-giving. There were some notable exceptions to these overall patterns, and in these cases children experienced considerable difficulty adapting to changes involving new locations and social networks. Some children also experienced considerable distress in relation to decreasing contact, or lack of contact, with their non-resident parents. This was especially the case in families where a parent had left suddenly and without explanation, and children could not contact them. Children in families where there had been violence in the home, or where parents were unwell, also experienced considerable problems over the time of the separation and the events that surrounded the separation. The experiences of these children, and the impact of the events they experienced, are discussed in more detail in Chapter 8. Most children did not experience a negative impact of the separation on their school work. Difficulties were mainly experienced by girls, in both age groups, and were typically related to problems with concentration caused by preoccupation or feeling upset. These problems tended to be resolved once children had adapted to the changes in life.

CHAPTER 8: CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES  
OF RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR  
PARENTS FOLLOWING SEPARATION

adjustment  
stability  
relationship  
security  
contact  
communication  
involvement  
family

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines children's perceptions of the effects of parental separation on their relationships with their parents. Children's accounts of their relationships with their parents post separation highlight the importance of considering parental separation as a process, which is ongoing for many years, before and after their parents have separated. Many of the patterns of relating to parents which had been established over the years, while living together as a family, were still evident in children's relationships with their parents after separation. However, all children had to adjust to the change in family circumstances and, in particular, to living with one parent. While some children had frequent, regular contact with non-resident parents, other children experienced disappointment and uncertainty, and, in a small number of cases, children had no contact with or information about their non-resident parent. In many cases, changes were ongoing which meant that children had to adapt to multiple changes in these relationships.

For most children, there were both positive and negative elements in their descriptions of relationships with parents post separation. However, when asked in particular about the impact of the separation on their relationships with parents, children tended to highlight either positive or negative changes. Eight children (13%) found it impossible to respond to this question, as they were very young when their parents had separated and they could not remember a time before the separation. We look first at children's relationships with their resident parents, and move to a focus on relationships with non-resident parents in the second half of the chapter.

## RESIDENT PARENTS

Many children (15, 25%) perceived no change in the quality of their relationships with resident parents and these children were mainly among the younger age group. It is possible that older children were better able to articulate subtle changes in their patterns of relating to parents. It is also possible that parents were more protective of younger children and, therefore, tried to arrange family routines which preserved a sense of continuity.

### *Positive changes*

A high proportion of children (24, 40%) felt that they were getting on better with their resident parent since the separation. Several factors can be seen to have contributed to positive changes: children's perceptions of parents as available and accessible, the resolution of conflict between parents or children's removal from its immediate impact, parents providing clear and consistent information about family arrangements, and children's greater understanding of their parents' feelings and behaviour over time.

In many cases, children simply spoke of 'getting on better' with resident parents and 'feeling closer' since the separation.

*I'm closer to him because I live with him and he knows everything that goes on for me.*

(girl, aged 14, 4 years since separation)

*It hasn't really changed ... it's just made us closer.*

(girl, aged 11, 4 years since separation)

Many children felt that their resident parent had become more available to them since the separation and this was for a variety of reasons. In some cases, the fact that parents were no longer so caught up in their own adjustment to the changes in their marital relationship appeared to create more space for the child's relationship with them.

*Me mam is just carrying on, but the first time it happened she was real sad about it and now she's just carrying on as happy as she normally was.*

(boy, aged 14, 3 years since separation)

One younger child described how things were better with his mother now but described a feeling of sadness and loneliness at the time of the separation, when his mother appeared to be dealing with her own difficulties of adjusting to the change in family life.

**C:** *We got a bit lonely. We got a bit lonely just me and my mam, and she was very depressed ... I remember that, that, em, she would sit in bed. And she'd be thinking ...*

**R:** *Okay. And would that be difficult for you?*

**C:** *Em, it would 'cos I wouldn't know what to do ... go in and say 'okay' but I did that a few times.*

(boy, aged 10, 8 years since separation)

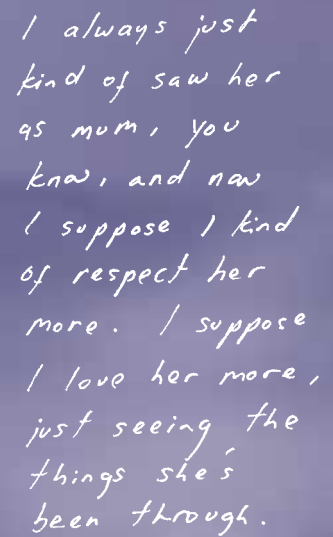
Parental availability and responsiveness seemed also to be facilitated where children could communicate openly and with ease to their parents.

*Me and my mam used to always talk about it and she used always to hug me and I'd start crying and stuff ... so it was kind of myself and her.*

(girl, aged 9, 4 years since separation)

*Well, she was there if I got upset or anything, like she was there so I could talk to her. I could ask her a question, like ... and she was a girl, so it was easier.*

(girl, aged 14, 5 years since separation)



*I always just kind of saw her as mum, you know, and now I suppose I kind of respect her more. I suppose I love her more, just seeing the things she's been through.*

Girl, aged 16,  
5 years since  
separation

For other children, the experience of parental separation allowed them to see their resident parent in a new light. These children came to admire their parents for being able to cope with their own situations of worry and loss. An awareness of the problems their parents were experiencing throughout the separation process brought these children closer to their parent. Parental care and affection, which they had perhaps not been so aware of, were more appreciated following the separation:

*I always just kind of saw her as mum, you know, and now I suppose I kind of respect her more. I suppose I love her more, just seeing the things she's been through.*

(girl, aged 16, 5 years since separation)

*I found out she was stronger ... and she risked [a lot] for me*

(girl, aged 9, 3 years since separation)

*I realised that I love him much more because he took us all and he didn't have to.*

(girl, aged 14, 4 years since separation)

### **Negative changes**

A smaller proportion of children (13, 21%) perceived relationships with resident parents to be more difficult since the separation. Once again, the nature of the relationship which children had built up with both parents, prior to the separation, played a significant role in how they got along with this parent following the separation. Where conflict or tension had always been present in relationships with resident parents, adjusting to post separation changes was sometimes difficult.

*[The] relationship with her [mother] isn't the best, but I understand what she has to go through, you know, separated ... we don't really get along, you know, and I probably do something, that I shouldn't, and she just shouts at me or something.*

(boy, aged 16, 5 years since separation)

In a small number of families, children found their resident parent to be emotionally unavailable or unresponsive. This occurred in some families where parents appeared to be distressed or unwell. For example, one 14-year-old girl had more arguments with her mother since the separation:

*She gives out to me more. If she is angry now, she gets angrier than before and if she is happy, she gets happier. That sounds so odd!!*

(girl, aged 14, 1 year since separation)

In other cases, children felt that their parents were making extra demands, and this was a strain on the relationship.

*Even though I'm out playing ... she calls me in to go to the shop or make her a cup of tea while she's in bed or something. I help her when she's sick.*

(girl, aged 8, 2 years since separation)

Children who had been very close to their non-resident parents before the separation sometimes had difficulties with their resident parent afterwards, and this was particularly so if they felt their resident parent was somehow responsible for the separation.

*That's when I (had problems with) me ma since ... because she got rid of him out of the house.*

(boy, aged 16, 5 years since separation)

Much of what children valued in terms of maintaining and developing relationships with resident parents was reflected in their relationships with non-resident parents. The following section reports on children's perceptions of relationships with parents no longer living in the home.

*We're just closer  
and he just is..  
I don't know ...  
he tells me he  
misses me and  
everything.  
I know he does..  
he does .*

Girl, aged 11,  
1 year since  
separation

## NON-RESIDENT PARENTS

One of the most important changes encountered by children following separation is adjustment to parents, and therefore children and one parent, living apart. As we reported in Chapter 7, children's contact with their non-resident parent was, on the whole, quite regular and frequent. The majority of these children (68%) saw non-resident parents at least once a week. On the whole, children were satisfied with these contact arrangements, although many spoke of missing their non-resident parent, and some children wished to have more time to spend with them.

*Lately, it has hit me that my dad doesn't come home and I don't like that because I used to always feel really excited about that.*

(girl, aged 14, 1 year since separation)

Many children (17, 28%) perceived no change in the quality of their relationships with their non-resident parent, despite the fact that this parent no longer lived in the home.

*Lately, it has hit me that my dad doesn't come home and I don't like that because I used to always feel really excited about that.*

Girl, aged 14,  
1 year since  
separation

### **Positive changes**

Almost one-third of the children (18, 30%) described their relationships with non-resident parents as being more positive since the separation. The importance of seeing their non-resident parent on a regular basis, knowing where and how to contact them and, perhaps most importantly, feeling assured that non-resident parents wished to see them, were key messages from these children. As with resident parents, the positive relationships which had been established prior to the separation appeared to have a significant impact on children's continued and enhanced closeness to this parent.

*It's stronger ... definitely stronger. Because we share so much now. Like, he shares his secrets and I share mine and we get on very well. Well, not secrets, you know, but we have things that we tell each other.*

(girl, aged 14, 1 year since separation)

Children valued having dedicated time with their non-resident parents as, for some children, their non-resident parent had often been absent from the home prior to the separation.

*I'm able to talk to him now because I wouldn't be able to see him that much because he would just come in from work and then have dinner and go to bed ... even though I see him just once a week, but I feel I'm closer with him now.*

(girl, aged 11, 4 years since separation)

*We're just closer and he just is ... I don't know ... he tells me he misses me and everything. I know he does ... he does.*

(girl, aged 11, 1 year since separation)

A small number of young children saw their relationship with their non-resident parent as being better for very practical reasons, such as, their dad bought them more things. For this particular child, it was not clear how he felt about his father's change in behaviour:

**C:** *He kind of spoils you now 'cause if you ask him for anything now he'll give it to you.*

**R:** *Okay ... and is that nice?*

**C:** *Well, he's just trying to win me over and stuff.*

(boy, aged 11, 1 year since separation)



### ***Negative changes***

Seventeen children (28%), however, experienced problems in their relationships with non-resident parents following their parents' separation. These difficulties centred around contact and parental commitment. Children became upset when parents were not consistent in maintaining frequent contact. Most children seemed to feel that it was the responsibility of the non-resident parent to maintain consistent contact, and a small number of children expressed disappointment that this was not happening for them.

*R: You'd like to see him more, would you?*

*C: No, I wouldn't like to see him at all.*

*R: Why not?*

*C Because, like it's up to him to make arrangements to see us but he's not doing it.*

*(boy, aged 14, 4 years since separation)*

Contact with non-resident fathers in the present study was generally regular and quite frequent. When children did not have this experience, however, they usually took reduced contact or broken contact arrangements to mean that a parent was not committed to, or interested in, how their lives were taking shape. This interest in a child's life could be communicated through simple but essential gestures, such as remembering a child's birthday, or more long-term interest and investment in their child's development. These points are illustrated in the following two extracts:

*C: At the moment, I'm not even speaking to him.*

*R: Why is that?*

*C: Because he, he forgot my birthday.*

*R: Alright, so that really upsets you?*

*C: Yeah.*

*R: And up to then, how often had you been seeing him?*

*C: Oh, not much because ... I don't know, we've just kind of grown apart. We didn't talk to each other. We didn't phone each other. That sort of thing.*

*(girl, aged 16, 6 years since separation)*

*I feel my dad could have sort of made the effort maybe to say 'well until you're 18 I'll stay in Dublin' and then you can ... you know ... I felt that that on his part was something that was done wrong.*

*(girl, aged 17, 4 years since separation)*

In exceptional cases, where there were no opportunities for any contact with a non-resident parent, children were evidently upset and confused. Six<sup>6</sup> children in the present study had no contact with, and little or no information about, their non-resident parent.

---

<sup>6</sup> One of these six children had chosen to have no contact with her non-resident parent due to violence she had witnessed in the home prior to the separation. A further two children in the older age group had chosen to have reduced contact with non-resident parents due to experiences of violence in the home before the separation.

*I feel my dad  
could have sort  
of made the  
effort maybe to  
say 'well until  
you're 18 I'll  
stay in Dublin'.*

Girl, aged 17,  
4 years since  
separation

Such situations gave rise to feelings of hostility towards the absent parent.

*I just say he's dead ... because I don't see him. I'm never going to anyway. But me auntie, she keeps telling him 'you should go and see your sons,' but he says he doesn't want to ... he says he's moving on.*

(boy, aged 16, 8 years since separation)

Where children perceived a non-resident parent to have been consistently 'absent' from the home before the separation, or to have abused or neglected relationships within the family, both before and after the separation, their response was generally to focus on a more positive relationship with the remaining parent. This was the case mainly for older rather than younger children, and is discussed in more detail in the following section.

## INTER-PARENTAL CONFLICT

Marital conflict has been found to be especially harmful to children if it happens in their presence, involves physical violence, is about the children themselves, or is unresolved (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Where children had experienced prolonged conflict or violence between their parents in the home, parental separation often represented an end to this disturbance and the possibility of renegotiating their relationships with parents. Some children felt that, once their parents had resolved their own conflict through separating, their behaviour towards them, the children, had improved.

*My dad used to tell me to shut up and things ... but since he's been away, it's made a huge difference; he's really nice to me ... he always takes me out. It's just better.*

(girl, aged 9, 7 years since separation)

These children also experienced more freedom to relax and be at ease in their relationships, which had previously been anxious and tense as children worried about the welfare of parents:

*'Cause I used to ring around ... like, if she wasn't in the house when I came back, I'd ring around the world looking for her and I'd always want to go away from here with her ... now I know I don't have to look after her. She's a big girl. She can look after herself.*

(girl, aged 16, 5 years since separation)

Three children in the older age group had chosen to have little or no further contact with their non-resident parent who had been violent in the home before the separation and, in two of these cases, the violence had been used against the child as well as against the other parent. In the case of one of these children, her mother's continued contact with her father was a source of anger and upset:

*I'd be more proud to say that they'd separated than to say he was still living in the house.*  
(girl, aged 15, 1 year since separation)

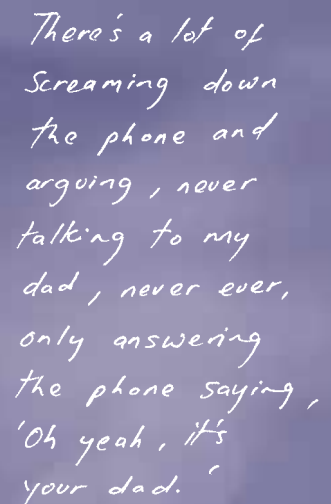
However, a small number of children experienced better relationships with these parents and this seemed to be because they now had a sense of some control over the frequency and nature of their interactions with their parents.

*Well, like when me da comes up I don't really like it because he stays for ages. When he used to be allowed in the house ... me da, like, would say something smart and it would probably come as a fight or something.*  
(girl, aged 10, 1 year since separation)

*Now I can just ask her, 'Ah mam, will you come shopping with me?' and she'll say 'Yeah' but a couple of years ago I couldn't say that. I'd have to get one of me friends to come with me. It used to hurt me because my friends used to have a close relationship with their mam and, like, they could go places that I couldn't.*  
(girl, aged 14, 4 years since separation)

The complexities of family relationships, and the effects of strong affectional ties on children's relationships with their parents, are evident in stories of an 8-year-old girl who had witnessed extreme physical violence against her mother by her father with whom she no longer had any contact. While obviously distressed about the violence she had witnessed, the child was finding it very difficult to live without her father in her life. Perhaps part of the reason the sense of loss was so acute for this child was the fact that she had no control at all over the fact that he was no longer in contact.

On the basis of children's reports, violence between parents appeared to be more the exception than the rule in the present study. However, many children had experienced conflict and unpleasantness between parents, and expressed their relief when this ended following the separation of their parents. Other studies have shown that when conflict is present in families before separation, children typically express paradoxical feelings of relief and sadness when their parents part (Pryor & Rodgers,



*There's a lot of screaming down the phone and arguing, never talking to my dad, never ever, only answering the phone saying, 'Oh yeah, it's your dad.'*

Girl, aged 9,  
7 years since  
separation

2001). In some cases, frequent conflict or hostility continued after the separation, and this was uncomfortable, distressing and embarrassing for children. One younger child described this as follows:

*There's a lot of screaming down the phone and arguing, never talking to my dad, never ever, only answering the phone saying, 'Oh yeah, it's your dad.'*

(girl, aged 9, 7 years since separation)

Continued conflict and unpleasantness between parents following the separation also appeared to heighten children's sense of being somehow different from other families around them.

*That's what annoys me most ... because they aren't like a normal separated couple. If she was, like, 'come on in for a cup of tea' or something, like. They could be friends, but she doesn't want to be.*

(boy, aged 16, 5 years since separation)

Where parents were able to develop positive contact, it seemed that this contributed to children feeling more at ease with both of their parents.

## INTER-PARENTAL CO-OPERATION

Adapting to the absence of their non-resident parent and getting on with their resident parent was made more problematic for children where one parent frequently criticised another parent, or where there was little or no civil contact or co-operation between parents.

*They were angry with each other and said, like, 'your dad's stupid and very mean and very selfish.'*

(boy, aged 10, 8 years since separation)

In contrast to this, where there was some evidence of inter-parental co-operation, children seemed to feel more comfortable in their contact with both parents. Examples of such co-operation were where a resident parent clearly encouraged contact with a non-resident parent.

*I knew I could have contact with him 'cause my mum said that whenever we wanted to see our dad, we could ... she wasn't going to stop us having a relationship with our dad.*

(girl, aged 16, 6 years since separation)

Another example of co-operation between parents was in cases where the non-resident parents seemed to show an awareness and understanding of the difficulties their children might experience in their relationships with the parent remaining in the home. One child spoke of how his father helped him to understand the particular problems that his mother was coping with:

*My dad talks to me. He says I'll have to start doing more. I'll have to help around the house and things. He talks to us about helping and looking after [mum].*

(boy, aged 13, 2 years since separation)

While acknowledging that inter-parental co-operation between parents following separation may be difficult, it is important to point out that small gestures of respect and civility between parents were highly valued by children and contributed to better relationships with both parents. Consistent with this view, previous research has pointed to the important influence, positive or negative, of the continuing relationship between parents following parental separation on the development of their children (Whiteside, 1998). Research has also shown that post-divorce family relationships between parents, and between each parent and child, are especially important as mediators of children's responses to divorce (Maccoby, Depner & Mnookin, 1990).

## DISCUSSION

These accounts of change and continuity in relationships with parents following parental separation point to the importance of considering children's experience of relationships post-separation as an ongoing process, and of being aware that, although there may be confusion and uncertainty following a recent separation, for many families it is possible to move beyond this stage, and to re-negotiate relationships within the new context. It is equally important to emphasise that, although many of these children spoke positively about their relationships with both resident and non-resident parents post-separation, closeness and communication with parents was often interspersed with periods of increased conflict, lack of understanding, and fear and anxiety about what was happening within their families. Several key factors that contribute to good and improved relationships with parents can be delineated on the basis of these accounts.

First, it appears that many of the qualities in the child-parent relationship prior to the separation helped children to shape their patterns of relating to parents post separation. Therefore, when children had previously enjoyed a close and trusting relationship with their parents, this was likely to continue and to facilitate positive adjustments to the reality of the new arrangements.

Second, children's perceptions of their parents as being available and responsive to their needs influenced their evaluation of the relationship. Children needed reassurance that parents were concerned about their welfare. Where parents were viewed as open to talking about the separation and about children's needs, children's perceptions of the relationship

*I knew I could have contact with him 'cause my mum said that whenever we wanted to see our dad, we could... She wasn't going to stop us having a relationship with our dad.*

Girl, aged 16,  
6 years since  
separation

tended to be positive. They valued clear and consistent reassurances about new family arrangements.

A third factor that had an important influence on child-parent relationships was the nature of contact with non-resident parents. Positive relationships were maintained and weaker relationships strengthened when contact was predictable and satisfactory to children.

A fourth factor that seemed to have a positive impact on children's relationships with parents was the ending of children's exposure to conflict between their parents, as this appeared to create the opportunity for children to feel more at ease with their parents. The reduction in daily conflict also helped to create more opportunities for children to gain their parents' focused attention.

A fifth factor in shaping improvements in relationships was mutual co-operation between parents, demonstrated when the resident parent facilitated access to the non-resident parent, and also when parents displayed respect for each other in the presence of the child.

Finally, positive relationships were also facilitated by children's growing understanding of their parents. When parents were available and responsive, and communicated clearly with children about what was happening in the family, children made active efforts to understand their parents and this contributed to more positive relationships.

CHAPTER 9:  
CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES OF  
COPING AND SUPPORT

adjustment  
stability  
relationship  
security  
contact  
communication  
involvement  
family

## INTRODUCTION

One of the main aims of this study was to gain an understanding of children's strategies for coping with the separation, and the sources of support that they found most helpful in doing so. In this chapter, we first present children's perspectives on the role played by different types of support, both informal (family, friends) and formal (counselling/peer support services, school), and explore the mechanisms that may explain how they help children.

Children were asked to indicate whether, and to what extent, people in various domains of their lives had been helpful to them: family, relatives, school, services and friends/neighbours. The large majority of the children were able to identify a number of sources of support, both formal and informal, which they perceived to be helpful to varying degrees. A small number of children felt that they had not received any help.

*I think your family is the main place for support.*

Girl, aged 16,  
5 years since  
separation

## INFORMAL SOURCES OF SUPPORT

### **Parents**

Family (parents and siblings) was considered to be the most important source of support, and children were most likely to cite their parents, in particular, as their main source of support. Eighteen (60%) of the younger children stated that their mothers helped them, either a lot (15), or a little (3). Six (20%) saw their father as helping a lot (4 girls and 2 boys), and two as helping a little (2 girls). Two other children cited 'family', without specifying which members (parents/siblings).

In the older age group, nineteen children (63%) stated that their mother had helped them; sixteen stated that their mother helped them a lot (12 girls and 4 boys), while three stated that their mother helped them a little (1 girl and 2 boys). Ten children (33%) indicated that their father had helped, five stating that their father had helped a lot (3 girls and 2 boys) and five stating that their father had helped a little (2 girls and 3 boys). In some families, children found one parent to be helpful while the other was not.

*My mum was a big help but my dad, he was really distant ... just couldn't be bothered.*

(girl, aged 11, 4 years since separation)

Some children were proactive in seeking help from their parents, while others simply saw it as their parents' role to provide help.

*Mostly the parents are the people that should be there.*

(girl, aged 14, 5 years since separation)



*I think your family is the main place for support.*

(girl, aged 16, 5 years since separation)

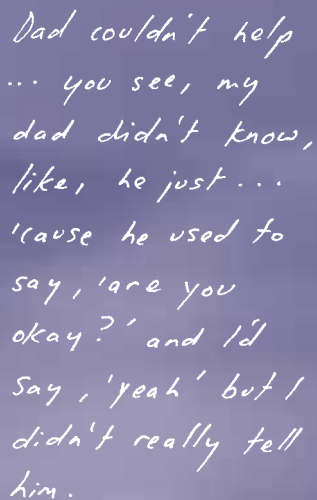
Still others actively avoided seeking help or support, in the belief that this would add to the burden already experienced by their parents.

*Dad couldn't help ... you see, my dad didn't know, like, he just ... 'cause he used to say, 'are you okay?' and I'd say, 'yeah' but I didn't really tell him.*

(girl, aged 9, 4 years since separation)

*I won't really say anything to me da in case it was on his mind as well, you know that way, so I wouldn't want to upset him.*

(girl, aged 13, 4 years since separation)



*Dad couldn't help  
... you see, my  
dad didn't know,  
like, he just ...  
'cause he used to  
say, 'are you  
okay?' and I'd  
say, 'yeah' but I  
didn't really tell  
him.*

Girl, aged 9,  
4 years since  
separation

Children cited a range of different ways in which they found their parents to be helpful to them in relation to the separation, as the following sections illustrate.

#### *Explaining/giving information*

One of the ways in which children found it most important for parents to be helpful was being available to talk about the separation and especially to clarify and discuss any changes in family arrangements

*Me mam told me everything ... like, she never hid anything from me ...*

(girl, aged 16, 5 years since separation)

*Well, like, she was there if I got upset or anything, like, she was there so I could talk to her, I could ask her a question, like.*

(girl, aged 14, 5 years since separation)

*We all, like, discussed it and talked about it, anytime any changes were going to happen like. She'd ask about them.*

(boy, aged 15, 2 years since separation)

#### *Reassuring*

Many children felt the need for reassurances from non-resident parents about staying involved with the family after the separation. Parents' affirmation of their commitment to being available was, for many children, the crucial factor in helping them to cope with the changes in the family.

*Because they said that I'd still get to see both of them, as often as I used to ... they tell us that there's no problem and you still get to see them.*

(girl, aged 8, 4 years since separation)

#### *Listening and 'just being there'*

A third way in which parents helped children to cope with the separation was by being available to listen to children about their feelings and concerns. Children were more likely to talk about their feelings with parents than with anybody else.

*... because when I was feeling sad I told her and she helped me.*

(girl, aged 9, 5 years since separation)

*Mum ... she was always there and she always, like, she knew if there was something wrong as well, she could tell by the behaviour or the way we were acting ...*

(girl, aged 14, 5 years since separation)

#### **Siblings**

Siblings were also mentioned as being an important source of support by ten children (33%) in the younger age group. Six of the younger children (3 boys and 3 girls) stated that their sisters had 'helped a lot', while three children (2 girls and 1 boy) said they helped a little. One boy said that his brother had helped him a little. In the older age group, eleven children (37%) thought that siblings had been a source of help, with three children (all girls) saying that their sisters had 'helped a lot' and two (1 girl and 1 boy) that their sister had 'helped a little'. Four children (3 girls and 1 boy) saw their brother as having 'helped a lot' and one boy stated that his brother had helped him a little.

Siblings were mainly seen as helping by being ready to listen. Several children mentioned that their siblings were there for them to talk to, especially if they had enjoyed a close relationship prior to the separation.

*Because, like, the two of us have always been, gone through things together and, like ... because we're close in age, we're, like, very close. And, like, we do lots of things together.*

(girl, aged 16, 13 years since separation)

#### **Relatives**

As mentioned earlier, children tended to experience more continuity than change in their contact with members of their extended family, and some children also perceived them to be an important source of support, both for themselves and for their parents. Grandparents and aunts featured strongly among those identified as helping most. Thirteen children (22%) cited grandparents as being an important source of support, helping them 'a lot',

*Because they said  
that I'd still get  
to see both of  
them, as often  
as I used to...  
they tell us that  
there's no problem  
and you still get  
to see them.*

Girl, aged 8,  
4 years since  
separation

while a further eight (13%) stated that their grandparents had helped them 'a little.' It should be noted that nineteen children (32%) perceived other relatives (aunts, uncles, cousins) as helping them a lot, and fourteen (23%) as helping them a little. In many comments, the theme of relatives providing support on an ongoing and predictable basis was evident.

*Me nana ... because she's always been there from ... when the fighting all started ...*

(girl, aged 14, 4 years since separation)

*[My] auntie ... 'cause she's always been there for me.*

(girl, aged 14, 4 years since separation)

Aunts often played the role of confidante, and in some cases helped children to 'keep their minds off' the family problems by taking them out.

### **Friends**

Friends were identified as an important source of support for some children, with seven (23%) of the children in the younger age group stating that friends 'helped a lot', and a further nine (30%) seeing friends as 'helped a little'. Friends were an even more significant source of support for children in the older age group, with thirteen (43%) of the children in the older age group stating that friends 'helped a lot', and seven (23%) stating that friends 'helped a little'.

In both age groups, children were highly selective in the choice of friends to confide in about their parents' separation. Typically, but not invariably, they confided in those whom they saw as most likely to understand, due to having a similar experience. Indeed, some friends mentioned as a source of support were not their closest friends, with whom they would be more likely to share activities.

Friends helped in two main ways; first by listening/understanding and, second, by being available for activities that took children's minds off their parents' separation.

#### *Listening/understanding*

In many cases where children mentioned friends as supportive, they referred either to very close friends, or to friends who had a similar experience in their family.

*My friends ... they were brilliant. Everyone understood it and they would support me.*

(girl, aged 11, 4 years since separation)

*Just talking, like, about their experiences or whatever, when their mum and dad separated.*

(boy, aged 16, 5 years since separation)

*Going with my friends (helped) ... they gave me a break and made me feel good about myself.*

Girl, aged 14,  
4 years since  
separation

Frequently, however, children did not, at least initially, tell friends about their parents' separation, and a range of reasons were cited, among them their reluctance to appear to be different from their friends, and their embarrassment about other people knowing, their parents having told them not to discuss it with anyone initially, and their perception that only those with similar experiences would understand.

*I didn't really want to because most of them ... their mum and dad was still living together.*

(boy, aged 10, 4 years since separation)

In the older age group, however, it was more common for girls to have confided in their best friend, although not to widely disclose the family situation to their general peer group. One girl described friends as being one of the most important sources of support:

*... because they're the main people you'd be worrying about what they think.*

(girl, aged 16, 5 years since separation)

#### *Providing distraction or fun*

The most important role played by friends appeared to be as a means for children to enjoy themselves outside of their families. This indirect help from friends did not necessitate children disclosing information about the separation or other personal details about their families.

*Going with my friends [helped] ... they gave me a break and made me feel good about myself.*

(girl, aged 14, 4 years since separation)

#### **Neighbours**

In general, children did not see neighbours as a source of support, with the exception of some of their peers who lived close by and whom they had identified as having parents who were also separated. In these cases, children tended to refer to them as friends who lived nearby. There were also some children who saw their neighbours as being helpful, but mainly to their parents rather than to themselves. In this example a neighbour was seen as helpful to both mother and daughter.

*My next door neighbour used to come in and stay with me mam for a while and then she used to talk to me.*

(girl, aged 14, 5 years since separation)

## SCHOOLS

Children had mixed views on the value of school as a source of support. Five (17%) of the children in the younger age group identified school as 'helping a lot', while seven (23%) viewed school as 'helping a little.' In this age group, though, children were more likely to point out that they saw school as a domain in which they did not receive help or support. In the older age group, only one child perceived school as 'helping a lot', but twelve children (40%) identified it as 'helping a little'.

Children's views about school and its role in supporting them overlap with their views on the role of friends, in that children sometimes saw school as helpful if they felt supported by their friends at school. School was also helpful for children when they saw teachers as helpful, when they had received help from a guidance counsellor at the school, when they found a school-based intervention programme such as Rainbows helpful, and when school served as an important source of distraction from family problems. One girl, for example, found that school was helpful by being flexible in relation to her school work following the separation.

*[The teachers] didn't mind as much about my exams or anything because they knew what was going on.*

(girl, aged 14, 4 years since separation)

Another child mentioned that both teachers and his involvement in the Rainbows programme in the school had helped him to realise that he was not isolated.

*My teachers helped me by telling me that I'm not alone ... but I wouldn't believe them until I came to Rainbows.*

(boy, aged 10, 8 years since separation)

One of the most typical comments on school, however, was on its value as a place outside the family where children could stop thinking about family issues.

*I'd say sort of getting away from it [at school] helps.*

(girl, aged 17, 4 years since separation)

Children were not specifically asked about their contact with any formal support services within their school. Two children mentioned having talked to a school counsellor and finding it helpful, but it is not clear how many of the children actually had such contact. Children typically saw teachers with whom they discussed their parents' separation as being supportive. Most children, however, were reluctant to raise the issue with teachers about this matter. In many cases, children perceived school as not being helpful, simply because the schools did not know about the separation. It should be noted that, in most of these cases, children did not wish the school to know, due to their wish to maintain privacy. The issue of children's concerns about privacy and confidentiality will be discussed further below.

## SUPPORT SERVICES

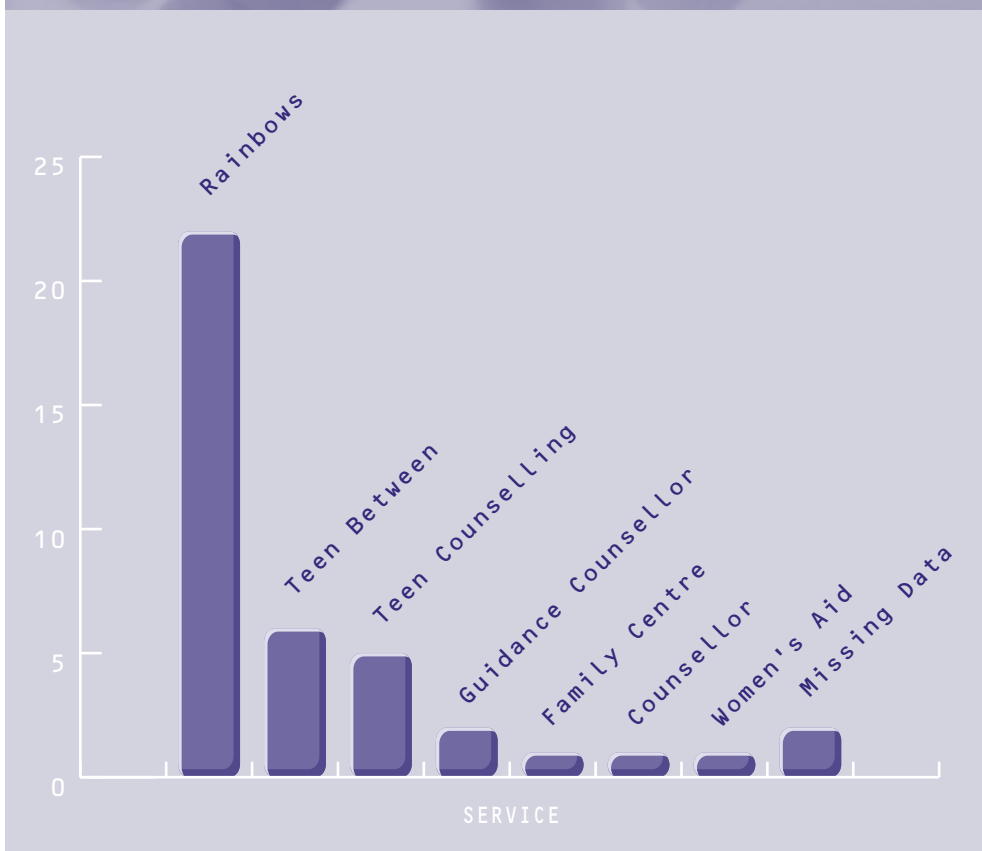
Forty children in the sample (67%) had at some time received support from a formal service in connection with their parents' separation and 33 children (55%) were currently attending services. For most of these children, services were perceived as being among the most important sources of support. Table 7 shows the types of services from which children had received support. More than half of the children had received support from the Rainbows<sup>7</sup> service, mostly through the school they were attending. In addition, three children had been in contact with the school guidance counsellor to talk about their parents' separation. Eleven of the children had received counselling on a one-to-one basis, outside of school, six (15%) with Teen Between and five (12.5%) with Teen Counselling.

TABLE 7: TYPE OF SERVICE ATTENDED

	No.	%
Rainbows	22	55.0
Teen Between	6	15.0
Teen counselling	5	12.5
Guidance counsellor	2	5.0
Family Centre	1	2.5
Counsellor/psychologist	1	2.5
Women's Aid	1	2.5
Missing data	2	5.0
Total	40	100.0

7 The large numbers of children attending Rainbows reflect the difficulty in gaining access to a sample of younger children through other sources.

FIGURE 9: TYPE OF SERVICE ATTENDED (N=40)



Nineteen children (63%) in the younger age group had participated in the Rainbows programme. Rainbows is a group-based intervention involving peer support, offered in a range of locations, but most commonly through school. The groups are facilitated by teachers trained in the programme. Two other children in this group had received individual support through other services, neither of which was school-based. Three children in this sample were involved in a parish rather than a school-based Rainbows group. Children's participation in the programme ranged from one month to three years.

In the older age group, children's experiences of formal support services were more varied, as Figure 9 illustrates. None of the children in this group were attending a group-based service, although one child had done so while in primary school. In both age groups of children, services were frequently mentioned as the main or most important source of help they received. Children described several ways in which they believed that services had helped them to cope and adapt to their parents' separation.

### **Someone to listen**

Some children simply found it helpful to talk to others and to be listened to, by somebody who was kind, whether in a group context or in one-to one counselling. Several children spoke about feeling comforted and reassured by simply talking to counsellors and peers, both in school-based and non-school settings.

*Just to tell people and talk about it helps you a lot.*

(girl, aged 11, 4 years since separation)

*The teachers [in Rainbows] were very nice.*

(boy, aged 10, 4 years since separation)

*Because I wasn't  
ashamed to say  
anything to them  
because they were  
all the same as  
me.*

Boy, aged 11,  
1 year since  
separation

### **Facilitating understanding**

Some children felt that services helped them to understand their own experiences and come to a better understanding of their parents' choices and behaviours.

*Well, she [counsellor in Teen Between] put a lot of things in perspective for me, even just talking about things ... so without kind of spoon-feeding me what's happening, I kind of figured things out for myself.*

(girl, aged 17, 4 years since separation)

### **Sharing experiences**

Some children found peer support groups particularly helpful. Several of the children highlighted the importance of shared experiences as being the most important feature of their experience of Rainbows. Some children simply found it helpful to know that there were others who shared the experience of parental separation, as this reassured them that they were not isolated or alone, and that they were not different from everybody else.

*Rainbows helped me [by showing me] that other people suffer from the same thing that you do and that they would help you.*

(boy, aged 10, 8 years since separation)

Being with children who had similar experiences also helped some children to gain the confidence to speak about their own feelings.



*Because I wasn't ashamed to say anything to them because they were all the same as me.*  
(boy, aged 11, 1 year since separation)

This benefit was not restricted to group-based support, however, as some children who had received individual counselling also felt better able to talk about their feelings.

*I feel that if I ... hadn't have come [to Teen Counselling] my problems would have got worse ... and it has kind of taught me how to speak and talk about how I felt ... so it's easier now to say how I feel.*

(girl, aged 16, 13 years since separation)

### **Trust and confidentiality**

Some saw services such as Rainbows and individual counselling as a safe place to talk about views and feelings because they perceived them to guarantee confidentiality.

*[Rainbows helped] because they helped to get everything out, like, 'cause they won't tell anyone.*  
(girl, aged 8, 4 years since separation)

Some children did not, however, feel assured of such confidentiality and did not wish to disclose anything about their family situation in group settings, or within the school.

It is important to note that some of the children did not perceive support services to be desirable or helpful.

## **BARRIERS TO SEEKING AND ACCEPTING SUPPORT**

### **Perceptions of services as unhelpful and/or unnecessary**

A small number of children who had contact with services discontinued their involvement, or wished to do so, and their reasons varied. Some children simply preferred not to talk to people, either because they generally did not use this as a coping strategy (see section 'Barriers to support' below) or because they found it upsetting to do so.

*I don't want to talk ... like I don't want to talk about it because it makes me upset.*  
(girl, aged 8, 2 years since separation)

Others simply did not enjoy the methods used or felt that that they had grown beyond what the service was offering and needed something different. One child, while now feeling that Rainbows was helpful, found it difficult to participate initially, due to her perception that the other participants were at a different stage of coping with their parents' separation.

*Because people were, like already after starting it, and they were okay and that, 'cause they were all, like, happy.*

(girl, aged 11, 2 years since separation)

*it has kind of  
taught me how to  
speak and talk  
about how I  
felt... so it's  
easier now to  
say how I feel.*

Girl, aged 16,  
13 years since  
separation

For still others, there was a reluctance to talk to counsellors because of concerns about family privacy, for reasons explored further below.

It should also be noted that some of the children in both age groups believed that they did not need help. For one adolescent boy, this was linked to the perception that counselling was only appropriate for children who were suffering from psychological disorder due to their parents' separation.

*I didn't feel like I needed it totally because I wasn't like ... like mad in the head.*

(boy, aged 16, 5 years since separation)

For others, the perception of not needing support from formal sources was based on the view that support should come from the family, and for two children, from the view that the separation, as one of the children put it, 'wasn't really important to me' (boy, aged 14, 3 years since separation).

### ***Perceptions of family as unhelpful and/or hurtful***

Close family and extended family did not play a supportive role in all families, and some children pointed to their disappointment with the lack of help that they received from their fathers (1 younger child and 3 older children). In one family, two sisters described their dad's role in giving support as follows:

*He didn't talk about it with us, he never ever said it, never met my mum, never helped us ... he felt he didn't have to help us at all, I suppose.*

(girl, aged 14, 5 years since separation)

*I can't say he helped ... changed maybe, but not helped.*

(girl, aged 16, 5 years since separation)

Some children recognised that the separation was difficult for their grandparents, particularly those who were parents of the non-resident parent.

*My grandad, my mum's dad, was really kind and he helped us but my dad's mum and dad, they wouldn't really talk about it that much.*

(girl, aged 11, 4 years since separation)

The comments of this 14-year-old suggest that children value overt expressions of concern

and availability for support, although adults may believe that it is more helpful to ignore the issue, perhaps in order to avoid discomfort or embarrassment to the child.

*My granny never said it, never asked how we were. My grandad, he didn't say it, but the way he acted implied that he was kind of worried and he used to look after us real well. My dad's sister, she was very good. She and my mum's brother, he told us, like, he's there for you, but my ... mum's sister, she didn't do anything, like, she never mentioned it either.*  
(girl, aged 14, 5 years since separation)

In some cases, people were seen by children to be hurtful, as the following examples illustrate. One of the adolescent girls saw her grandmother as unhelpful 'when she was against my dad'.

*My nanny doesn't really like my dad ... [she] helped a little but she kept going against my dad which I didn't really like.*  
(girl, aged 15, 1 year since separation)

A 14-year-old girl, who lived with her father, felt hurt that her mother's mother was critical of the care her father provided to the children.

*She puts all the blame on me, on me da. It hurts me because she puts me da down in front of me ... like, she says he doesn't really care about you ... he never looks after you properly ... If I had a bit more support from [my nana] it might not have been so bad.*  
(girl, aged 14, 4 years since separation)

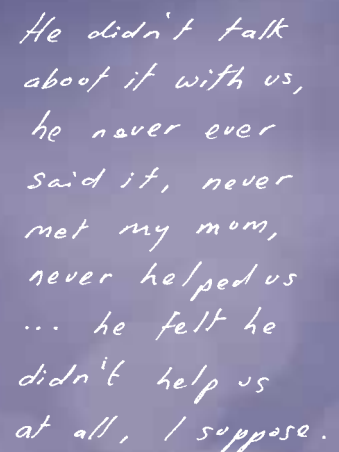
### **Perceptions of others as unhelpful and/or hurtful**

While friends were often helpful, sometimes peers were seen as hurtful, especially if children felt that they were teased or mocked because of their parents' difficulties.

*There was people around us that knew ... it was going to happen ... they slagged me and said, like, 'ah, you've no ma,' or something. Even to this day they still say, 'Oh so, your ma's an alcoholic' ... they'd be people I used to hang around with and I stopped hanging around with them because of my ma.*  
(girl, aged 14, 4 years since separation)

A 9-year-old girl described the impact that being teased had on her family as follows:

*We decided to move off that road because we kept on getting jeered ... people saying, 'your dad's gone,' and all.*  
(girl, aged 9, 2 years since separation)



*He didn't talk about it with us, he never ever said it, never met my mom, never helped us ... he felt he didn't help us at all, I suppose.*

Girl, aged 14,  
5 years since  
separation

She prefers the new area, because

*They don't know me da's gone. One person knows me dad's gone, but she doesn't jeer me or anything.*

These experiences added to children's sense of hurt at a time of considerable emotional vulnerability, and highlight the need to create greater awareness of the damaging effects that such comments can have.

### ***Perception of parental separation as a private family matter***

The issue of feeling 'different' emerged as an important theme in both age groups of children, but especially for the older children. A total of sixteen children (27%), four in the younger group and eight in the older group, referred to this issue, which clearly influenced their views on accepting support from any source outside the immediate family.

#### *Concerns about family privacy*

One of the older group said that he didn't take up counselling because he did not want to talk about this issue with strangers:

*I basically didn't want to ... start telling everything to, like, strangers, at the start ... If it's somebody you know, or that, it'd be okay to talk because they know you well and they'd listen properly ... but I don't feel ... I wouldn't, didn't really feel comfortable talking to anyone else about this.*

(boy, aged 13, 5 years since separation)

A girl in this group had started counselling, but discontinued because

*I didn't like [counselling] ... I felt that I'm telling someone who doesn't know anything about me ... I didn't think [the counsellor] had the right to know about what happened in our family 'cause she's not part of it.*

(girl, aged 14, 5 years since separation)

This view was in part based on the belief that it would not be possible for counsellors to help because they were not familiar with the complex issues and relationships within the family. It also indicates a view that such information rightfully belongs within the family, and should not be disclosed to outside parties.

One of the older girls thought that support systems within schools could not adequately address the needs of young people experiencing separation, as young people might not want their peers or teachers to know what was going on in their private lives. She felt that

support services outside schools could offer greater confidentiality, *'that nobody would notice'* (girl, aged 17, 4 years since separation).

Similarly, one of the boys in the older group argued that it was preferable to talk to strangers, particularly in a group situation, saying that group support would help, but that for reasons of confidentiality *'you'd have to get [the participants] from a different place'* (boy, aged 16, 1 year since separation).

#### *Concerns about what others might think*

Children's sense of being different was an important factor influencing their openness to talking to peers and friends. This was particularly important for the older group of children. A girl in the older group remarked that friends were

*... the main people you'd be worried about what they think.*

(girl, aged 16, 5 years since separation)

Another stated that she was

*... feeling isolated from everyone else because I was kind of different.*

(girl, aged 16, 13 years since separation)

#### *Perception that others might not understand*

Many of the participants had strong views about the capacity of others to understand their experiences and needs. This perception is best illustrated by the words of a boy in the older age group

*It's very hard to talk to somebody ... whose parents are living together ... 'cause they wouldn't have a clue, really.*

(boy, aged 16, 1 year since separation)

It was evident that many children strongly favoured talking to peers whose parents had separated or who had lost a parent through bereavement. One of the younger girls had talked to a girl in her neighbourhood who 'said it happened to her too' rather than speaking to her closer friends, while several others had also chosen to speak about their experiences only with peers who had a similar experience.

*I told a friend, the one that her dad died ... and I knew she would [understand].*

(girl, aged 14, 1 year since separation)

This view was also evident in the perception that group-based support services such as Rainbows are helpful mainly because the other participants understand and accept you as similar to them, because they have had the same experience.

*I wasn't ashamed to say anything to them [children in Rainbows] because they were all the same as me.*

(boy, aged 11, 1 year since separation)

A girl in the older group felt that counsellors could help more if they themselves had experienced parental separation and made this known to their clients.

*We decided to move off that road because we kept on getting jeered... people saying, 'your dad's gone,' and all.*

Girl, aged 9,  
2 years since  
separation

## PERSONAL COPING STRATEGIES

Children adopted a range of different strategies to deal with negative aspects of their parents' separation. It is notable that not all of these strategies involved talking to others about their experiences, and included simply being with others, finding sources of distraction, and thinking through issues alone.

### ***Seeking out peers with shared experiences***

As discussed above in relation to services, one of the most important features of services such as Rainbows, from the children's perspective, was that it helped them to overcome their difficulties with feeling 'different' from other children due to their parents' separation. In addition, many children sought out the company of children in their neighbourhoods whose parents were separated. It appeared that simply being in the company of others perceived to be in the same situation was as important as, or even preferable to, discussing the experiences.

### ***Seeking distraction***

There was a notable tendency of many children to seek out means of distracting themselves from difficult family dynamics or from the strain of the adjustment to new family arrangements. Several children mentioned that they found it helpful to apply themselves to their school work, or simply to get more involved in school activities, as a way to get their minds off problems they were experiencing in relation to parental separation.

*[School] just took my mind off it.*

(girl, aged 10, 1 year since separation)

*It helped me get away from things ... you get distracted with something else.*

(girl, aged 9, 2 years since separation)

*My sports [helped] mainly because it took me mind off it ... I knew I was good at something else so I just kept doing that.*

(girl, aged 14, 4 years since separation)

### **Talking to family, friends, and/or professionals**

For some children, 'just to talk' was valuable in itself. As mentioned earlier, however, there were some notable exceptions, where children found it unhelpful to talk and avoided doing so.

### **Being with people**

Being around people was seen as helpful to several children, whether friends, relatives or with their parents.

*I found kind of being around people and just generally sort of getting on with things.*

(girl, aged 17, 4 years since separation)

*I like going to my Dad's ... I don't really talk to him, you see ... just going to him [helps].*

(girl, aged 10, 1 year since separation)

### **Keeping a diary**

Two of the adolescent girls found it useful to keep diaries of their experiences:

*I had a diary and if something bad happened, I wrote it down a lot.*

(girl, aged 16, 5 years since separation)

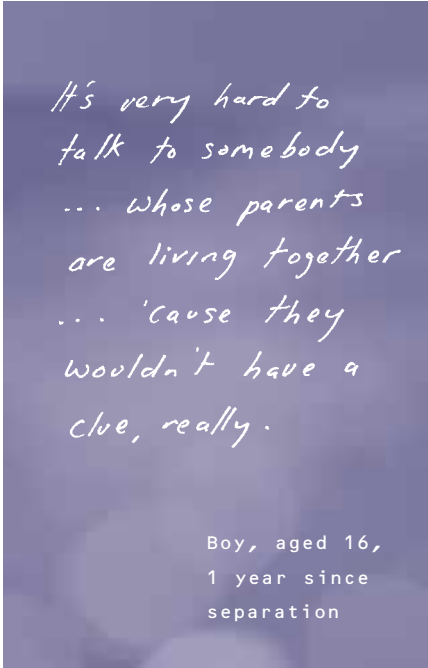
*I also wrote down what I wanted to say, like, if I wanted to talk to [my dad] I used to have a little diary and I'd wrote down into it what I felt.*

(girl, aged 14, 5 years since separation)

### **Keeping to oneself**

*I didn't really talk to anybody ... I just kept myself to myself, like, 'cause it was like a time bomb about to explode in the house, and when you mentioned something, someone was screaming at you ... so I just didn't talk to them.*

(girl, aged 17, 4 years since separation)



*It's very hard to talk to somebody ... whose parents are living together ... 'cause they wouldn't have a clue, really.*

Boy, aged 16,  
1 year since  
separation

These comments from children highlight the multitude of ways in which children approach adaptation to the changes in their family that accompany parental separation, and point to the need to consider children's support needs on an individual basis.

## VIEWS ON WHAT *COULD* HAVE HELPED

Children were asked to describe their experiences of formal support services, to identify the key supports that helped them, and the kind of supports they would like to have at critical times of transition and adjustment throughout the process of parental separation. This question was mainly answered by the older group of children, and among these, responses were quite varied. It was clear that, for some children, the most difficult aspect of the separation was becoming accustomed to not living with their father, and they believed that the only change that could have improved how they felt about the separation was increased contact with their fathers. This was especially the case where fathers lived at some distance, or where children had no contact with their non-resident parent. Their views on what could have helped them were as follows:

*If me dad lived nearer to me.*

(girl, aged 10, 3 years since separation)

*My daddy coming back.*

(girl, aged 8, 2 years since separation)

*My dad moving a bit closer to home.*

(girl, aged 9, 2 years since separation)

Several children commented on the ways in which formal services might have been more supportive, and these comments referred to access to services. One girl had experienced a lengthy wait to gain access to counselling, and believed that support should be accessible more quickly. Another girl, who had been attending Rainbows and found it helpful, felt that she could have benefited from support as the separation process itself unfolded, as well as later on, when her father had moved out.

*I was on my own [when I first found out] ... in the sense that no one was there to comfort me. If the Rainbows was there at that time it would have been a big help 'cause when it happens, see, you're, like, shocked.*

(girl, aged 10, 5 years since separation)

One adolescent boy made a similar point about services, highlighting the need for some families to have access to support in order to learn how to support each other through the process. Finally, one child would have liked more help from her teachers in coming to terms with the separation and its effects on her life. It is important to note, however, that children



have mixed views on disclosing their changed family situation in school. Several children also felt that they had received all the help they needed, through formal and/or informal sources.

## DISCUSSION

This chapter has focused on children's experiences of formal and informal support. The findings suggest that for all children, but especially younger children, parents constitute the most important source of comfort and support, and that they help children to cope with the separation in multiple ways, through availability, communication, reassurance, and in practical ways. Children also, importantly, tended to perceive parents as the rightful or most appropriate source of support. It is also notable that several children expressed an awareness that their parents were under strain and might find it difficult to give children the support they need. Some children said they concealed their need for support to parents to offset further strain or upset.

Within the family, siblings were also considered to be an important source of help for many children, particularly when they had close, confiding relationships prior to the separation. These findings contrast with Fawcett's (1998) findings that siblings were reported to be a source of help by only a minority of children. Hetherington (1989) suggests, however, that siblings may provide an important source of comfort and alliance in families experiencing such transitions.

In the present study, children reported a high value for support provided by members of their extended families. This was in keeping with Fawcett's (1998) findings that positive relationships existed between the children and a broad range of relatives. Yet the findings of these studies contrast with findings from the US, where Hetherington (1989) has found that grandparents only tend to play a strong support role when they live in the same household as the children. Our findings may be accounted for by continued geographical proximity of children's homes to those of grandparents on both sides of the family following separation, in contrast with the US, where mobility of families is generally higher than in Ireland and contact with grandparents may be more difficult to sustain. The findings regarding support from relatives on the side of the non-resident parent may also be explained in terms of the continued high levels of contact with their non-resident parent experienced by most of the children in the present sample.

Many children considered friends to be another important source of informal support. As was found in studies by Fawcett (1998) in Northern Ireland, and by Wade and Smart in England (2002) children were reluctant to disclose their parents' separation to their general peer groups. In the present study, children were more likely to confide in children whose parents had also separated. Many children, especially those in the younger age group, found friends to be helpful through shared activities that distracted them from problems in their families and helped them to feel better about themselves.

Forty children, or two-thirds of the sample, had received help through formal support services, and their evaluations of the importance of these services in helping them to cope

with their parents' separation were strikingly positive. In this sample, most of the children who had received support from a counsellor had done so through a service specialising in family relationships, although some children had received support from their school guidance counsellors. The mechanisms through which these services helped children adjust and cope were wide-ranging, but the most significant benefit for children appeared to be the role of services in reducing the sense of isolation that children felt, and helping them to make sense of their own views and expectations about what was happening in their families. The lower uptake of services by adolescent boys than girls in this sample is a matter that should be further investigated as it may reflect patterns in the general population. In addition, the availability and uptake of peer support models of intervention for adolescent children should be assessed.

School featured as an important source of support for a number of children, but was mainly found to be helpful in indirect ways, such as providing a source of distraction from their family problems. The potential exists for school to be helpful and supportive to children, but only if teachers and school guidance counsellors are aware of the transition that children are experiencing. Given the concerns that many children expressed about family privacy, it may be difficult for schools to act in a more direct way to support children in such times of transition. For a large proportion of the children, however, school is the location where they experience the Rainbows programme, and, in this sense, it is the context of one of the most important sources of support for younger children.

These findings highlight the extent to which children may feel confused and different from other children when their parents separate, and the need for support services that can help to reduce these negative feelings and help them to develop the confidence to talk about their feelings and views with others, should they wish to. These findings underscore the benefits that children can gain from discussion with other adults and children who have experienced parental separation themselves. A review of the research in the UK suggests that there is a particular lack of such direct support for children, in spite of evidence of its benefits for children (Rodgers & Pryor, 1998).

It is also important to keep in mind, however, that not all children want or feel they need to attend services for counselling, for a range of different reasons, including their reluctance to disclose details about their family to non-family members, their expectations that others may not understand them, and the possible perception that attending support services may mark them out as inadequate or 'needing help'. Some children simply preferred strategies other than talking to others for dealing with any negative feelings they had, such as becoming more involved in sports or other activities, or giving more attention to their school work. Younger children generally preferred to share activities than to talk, although they found it helpful to engage in these activities with a group who shared similar experiences in their families.

CHAPTER 10:  
CONCLUSIONS AND  
RECOMMENDATIONS

adjustment  
stability  
relationship  
security  
CONTACT  
communication  
involvement  
famil

## INTRODUCTION

This report has presented the methods and the findings of an exploratory study of children's experiences of parental separation, conducted in the Republic of Ireland, mainly in the Dublin area. The sixty children who took part in the study were aged between 8 and 17, but most were in the age groups 8-10 and 14-16, representing middle childhood and adolescence. Two-thirds of the children had previously been, or were currently, in receipt of formal services in connection with their parents' separation.

The findings of this study suggest that children's experience of parental separation cannot be reduced to a simple statement of 'positive' or 'negative'. Their experiences of events and relationships differed, both across and within families, depending on an array of factors, including their relationships with their parents before the separation. To understand the experiences of any one child, it is necessary to recognise the constellation of individual, interpersonal and contextual factors that contributed to those experiences. Notwithstanding the uniqueness of individual lives and experiences, it is possible to discern patterns of shared feelings and perspectives that can contribute to greater insight into the ways in which children's well-being can best be supported and enhanced following parental separation.

## FEELINGS AND PERSPECTIVES ASSOCIATED WITH THE SEPARATION

Children typically reacted with surprise or shock when they learned that their parents would separate, even if they had been aware of considerable difficulties in their parents' relationship, and they felt unprepared for the changes that ensued. Their reactions to the separation were diverse across the sample, and sometimes contradictory within individual children, in that they described a mix of feelings, both positive and negative, often felt simultaneously. These findings are similar to those from studies in other countries, such as New Zealand (Smith *et al.*, 1997) and in the UK (Walczak & Burns, 1984; Mitchell, 1985). In the present study, children's descriptions of the process of the separation strongly suggest that *both* the conflict and the separation are difficult for them. Almost all expressed sadness about the end of their parents' relationship and of the division of the family, but not all felt regret about the separation. In spite of the sense of loss, some children felt relief, particularly when conflict between their parents had been a source of distress. They wanted parents' interactions with each other following the separation to be civil and respectful. This finding echoes findings from other studies (Fawcett, 1998; Smart *et al.*, 2001), and highlights children's awareness of parental conflict and an understanding of their own reactions to that conflict, and a need for greater harmony within the family, even when parents no longer live together. In this study too, some children said that it was important to them that their parents should continue to interact directly with each other, rather than avoid such interactions. This suggests that children's sense of loss may be heightened when contact between parents is minimal. Smart, Neale and Wade (2001)

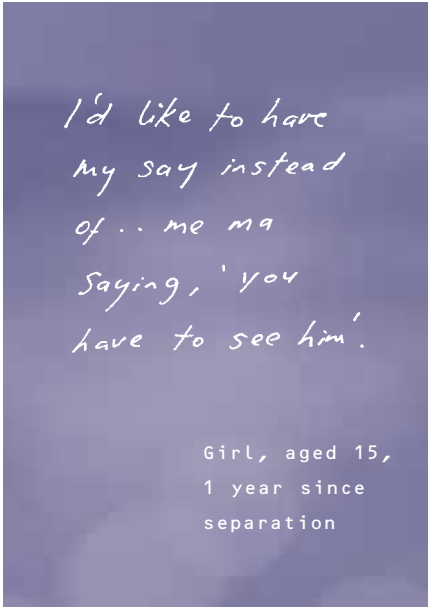
suggest that the adoption of co-parenting, where parents live in close proximity and share care of the child, perhaps even on a daily basis, can reduce or avoid this sense of loss.

Most children did not seem to blame themselves or anybody else for their parents' separation, with a few notable exceptions where there had been violence in the home, or where one parent had left suddenly and without explanation. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980), however, note that younger children tend to feel responsible for the separation. The lack of self-blame among children in this study may be attributable to their experiences with services.

In the present study, there was a notable pattern of children feeling worried about various aspects of their family life in connection with, or since, the separation. Children worried initially about loss of contact with the non-resident parent, and some had ongoing concerns about the implications of the separation for the future of the family. Some feared further loss, particularly when contact with non-resident parents was problematic, but to some extent even when it was positive and frequent. A number of children worried about a parent's welfare, and this inhibited children from sharing their anxieties with these parents. These findings highlight children's need to understand the changes that are taking place, and their implications, and points to the importance of communication within families, not only at the time of separation, but in ensuing years.

Children also tended to feel that their families were different from other families, and to feel embarrassed, a finding also noted by Fawcett (1998) in her study of adolescents in Belfast. Children's sense of being 'apart' was reflected in their extreme reluctance to talk to others outside the family about their parents' separation or divorce; parental separation was a private family matter for most. This feeling may be attributable to the cultural context, given that separation is still relatively uncommon in Ireland, and divorce even more so. It may also arise from a sense among children that others may judge them or their families negatively, or simply fail to understand separation and its meaning for children, combined with a cultural value for privacy in matters relating to family relationships. These findings suggest the need for greater public awareness of parental separation and its meaning, particularly in children's everyday environments, such as schools.

Children's perspectives on their parents' separation usually changed over time as they came to a better understanding of what was happening and the implications for future family life. For example, many children said that their expectations about how their family situations would develop had changed a good deal since their parents had separated. Where some had originally expected that their parents' separation would be temporary, now most saw it as permanent. Indeed, many children had come to



*I'd like to have  
my say instead  
of... me ma  
saying, 'you  
have to see him'.*

Girl, aged 15,  
1 year since  
separation

hold the strong belief that their parents would not and *could not* live together, and that their families functioned better under the new arrangements than previously, when parents lived together. There was, however, strong continuity in their views about one key issue: the importance of staying involved with their non-resident parent. The majority of children in both younger and older age groups expressed confidence that their non-resident parent would continue to play the role of parent, even after the separation, and that they would be in frequent contact. Yet contact was the issue of greatest concern for most children, suggesting that children were aware that separation opened up the possibility for non-resident parents to withdraw from their lives. These concerns were often related to anxiety about new family members and the impact of these changes on family roles and relationships. Reassurances from parents were significant in reducing children's anxieties. Some children, however, had already experienced loss of or greatly reduced contact with parents.

## CONSULTING CHILDREN

The issue of taking part in making major decisions about such issues as custody and visiting arrangements with parents was difficult for children, and most expressed reluctance about playing such a role. These findings have implications for professionals who may feel that, because children have a right to be consulted, they should be encouraged to make their views known. Children's views about the desirability of being consulted in such matters may be influenced by a variety of factors at the cultural, family and individual level. At the level of society, the notion that children's views should be sought and considered may be absent, or, if present, may not have filtered through to children. In the Irish case, the importance of valuing children's perspectives is a core principle underlying the National Children's Strategy (2000), but national policy does not necessarily accurately mirror social values; children may not be aware that national and international policy promotes consultation, and may hold more 'conservative' views about the role of children in the family. In the present study, the idea that parents might consider discussing such matters with children before coming to a decision appeared surprising to the children, and many children simply took the view that parents know best. Children's views on this issue may also be influenced by family dynamics; families may not be in the habit of communicating openly and honestly about the preferences and needs of individual members, and discussions about whom to live with and how much time to spend together may seem difficult or impossible. In addition, in the present study, the issues of responsibility and loyalty emerged as strong themes, with children concerned about being asked to make impossible choices and about appearing disloyal to parents if they indicated preferences of any kind. The nature of children's relationships with parents also appeared to influence children's perspectives on this issue; they were more likely to insist on having their views heard when they were unhappy about the arrangement, because they wanted to see either more or less of a parent. Children's individual characteristics are also likely to influence

*I found it easier like, at home with mum, instead of, like, moving back and forth and that sort of thing, and then every Saturday we saw him.*

Girl, aged 16, 6 years since separation

their views on participation in these decisions and, in the present study, the most obvious of these factors was children's age. In the present study, younger children were more likely to think that parents should decide, a finding also reported by Smart and Neale (1999) from their UK study. In adolescence, where independence from parents steadily increases in importance, these views tend to change.

Given the complexity of the issue of children's participation in family decision-making, careful consideration should be given to the needs and rights of both children and their parents. The findings of this and other studies suggest that parents should speak to children about the separation and its implications, and should be willing to listen to children's views. If children are to be consulted in making decisions about future residence and access arrangements, parents should explain to children that their views, while valued, will not necessarily determine the arrangements that will be made. If they do not do so, children may feel disappointed and resentful if their choices are not upheld. It is also important to note that children's involvement in making family arrangements, such as visiting schedules, may need to be revised as children grow older and develop more independence, and also to take account of changes in their relationships with parents over time. Parents and professionals need to be alert to these changes in children's needs.

## **PATTERNS OF CHANGE ASSOCIATED WITH SEPARATION**

Parental separation requires children to make substantial adaptation. At a minimum, they need to adjust to living with one parent while visiting the other, or to shared parenting. This means a departure from the structure of daily living and care-giving to which, although there may have been parental conflict, they have been accustomed, and perhaps taken entirely for granted. Indeed, the loss of day-to-day contact with fathers is often cited by children as the most difficult thing about separation (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Kurdek & Berg, 1987; Smith *et al.*, 1997). The structural change implied by the separation is accompanied by adjustment at a practical level, in the organisation of family time to accommodate visits, and to changing family roles and responsibilities. In the present study, children shared a sense of loss in response to these changes, but particularly in relation to the absence of their fathers or mothers from the home.

Separation should not, however, be seen as a single event in children's lives, since there is a continuous need for some degree of adaptation over time. Usually there are several significant events that are associated with this process, including the occasion when

children are told about or come to learn about the separation, and the physical move of parents to living in different households.

Children's descriptions of the process of separation and how their family lives were affected were often sophisticated. They reflected a heightened awareness of family life, in that children were able to express how they had come to revise their own views and understanding of what happened within their family and their expectations for the future, as well as their role or the part they had played, and potentially could play, in actively affecting relationships and arrangements in the family. Few children said they had participated in making decisions about residence and visiting non-resident parents, in keeping with the findings of studies of children's participation in decision-making (Smith *et al.*, 1997; McDonald, 1990). In contrast with other studies, however, few children in the present study expressed the desire to be involved. It is not clear whether this can be attributed to cultural reasons, such as conservative views about family roles and/or lack of awareness of children's rights, or to other reasons. It points to the complexity of the issue of 'giving children a voice' in matters that concern them, and the sensitivity that parents and professionals need to bring to that issue to understand what children want and need.

## **PATTERNS OF ADJUSTMENT AND COPING**

Although many children reacted with shock and even distress to the separation initially, and found the physical departure and absence of a parent to be upsetting, most experienced adaptation and coping over time. For many children, in addition to earlier memorable and usually stressful events, there was an ongoing process of 'getting on' with life under changed family circumstances.

The separation process was navigated most successfully by children who were satisfied with the arrangements for residence and visiting, and with the level and stability of involvement with non-resident parents. Children also tended to have a more positive experience when they believed that parents had an ongoing sense of the impact of the process on the children, and when they perceived that parents were striving to manage the process with consideration for children's feelings and needs, and that they were committed to continuing to be available for children. This sense of parental interest and commitment contributed to children having an on-going sense of belonging to a family, in which all members continued to play an active role, although within a new family structure. Children perceived maintaining contact to be mainly the responsibility of their non-resident parent, although some recognised the role they themselves played in negotiating the relationship over time. Those children who had access to adequate information about what was going on, both initially and over time, without being drawn into their parents' relationship or conflict to an uncomfortable degree, also adapted more easily to the changes in the family. Children who were able to achieve a reduced sense of isolation were also coping better.

Most children availed of, and valued, support from both informal and formal sources. They



identified their immediate families as the main and most important source of support. More than anything, they wanted to talk to their parents, and most identified parents as their main and most valued source of support. Good communication with parents at the time of separation has been found to be protective for children against immediate and long-term negative consequences of separation and divorce (Walczak & Burns, 1984). Outside of the family, formal services emerged as the most valued source of support for children. In the present sample, two-thirds of the children had received formal support in relation to their parents' separation at some point. This should not be taken as representative of the proportion of children in the population who seek or accept such support. What is important to note is the high value placed by the children in this study on their counselling or peer group support experiences.

Participating in a group for children whose parents had separated was perceived by younger children as being particularly instrumental in helping them to overcome a sense of isolation. Both group-based support and individual counselling helped children to gain a better understanding of their family transition, and to express their views and feelings about it. Some children, however, said that they coped alone.

In focusing on the impact of separation itself, it is easy to overlook the circumstances leading up to it, some of which may begin long before parents agree to live separate lives. It is important to bear in mind that the separation, itself, may crystallise or highlight longstanding family problems (Furstenberg & Teitler, 1994). Many of the same processes that are often thought to be initiated when marriages dissolve may have been impacting on children's lives for many years before the separation event, and may have repercussions well beyond it.

*It was a very  
upsetting time...  
When he moved  
out it was...  
heartbreaking for  
me and (my  
sister)...*

Girl, aged 14,  
4 years since  
separation

### ***Patterns associated with age***

Findings about the comparative risks for children of parental separation at different ages are not conclusive. This may be due, in part, to the difficulty of disentangling the differential effects of current age, age at separation, and length of time since separation. Pryor and Rodgers (2001) point out that, when parents of very young children separate, children tend to spend longer in single-parent households and are more likely to experience living in a stepfamily household, and perhaps further transitions. This is an effect of time rather than age, however, '[s]o parental separation at a young age may be an early phase of an ongoing cumulative process, rather than a risk factor by itself' (p. 234). It is particularly difficult to isolate the effects of children's age at time of separation on their long-term well-being. There is some evidence of a pattern of response associated with age, both at the time of separation and in the

*I probably would have preferred if I could see both of them all the time... but I know that wasn't possible because they couldn't live together*

Girl, aged 16, 13 years since separation

short to medium term (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). There is also some evidence for an effect of time since separation on children's well-being. Burns and Dunlop (1999), for example, found that distress had diminished and feelings of relief increased once 5 years had elapsed since the separation.

In the present study, the average age of children in the total sample at the time of parental separation was 8 years ( $SD = 3.5$ ). Even in the older age group of children (currently aged 13-17), one-third were aged 11 or less when their parents separated. Furthermore, most of the children had experienced parental separation within the previous five years. Because there was little variance in children's age at time of separation and years since separation, it is not possible to separate the relative impact of these factors on their adaptation or coping<sup>8</sup>. It is important to note, however, that a number of children pointed to both age and the passing of time as important factors that shaped their responses to their parents' separation. Some showed an awareness of change in their own thinking and feelings about their parents' decisions and behaviours as they grew older, and as time passed since the separation. For example, the realisation that the separation was permanent seemed to be associated both with children growing older and seeing evidence, over time, that their parents were not going to reconcile.

In terms of their feelings and views about the separation, there were some important differences between the younger and older age groups of children (aged 8-11 and 13-17) in the sample. Younger children tended to talk about their experiences more in terms of events and consequences of the separation, and to reflect less on reasons for the separation. They were less well able than were adolescents to project what might happen in the future and to anticipate possible changes, although this did not mean that they were not concerned about what the future might bring. In the younger age group, however, some children appeared to try to cope with their anxieties about further family change by actively seeking reassurances from parents that they would not start new families. Some of these children believed that their parents would not ever enter into a new relationship or have more children. As would be expected, older children displayed a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of their parents' relationships, and the motivations for their behaviours towards each other and towards the children. They were more likely than younger children to evaluate the separation on the basis of its consequences for the family as a whole than solely for themselves, for example, referring to their parents' happiness rather than focusing

---

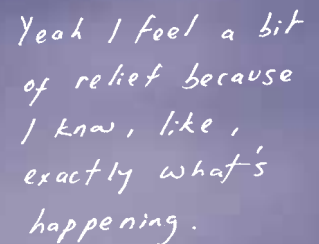
8 A follow-up study of children in the present sample is underway which should allow more in-depth analysis of the relative impact of age and time since separation.

solely on their own experiences. Perhaps because of this, they were more likely than younger children to have experienced a sense of relief in addition to sadness when their parents separated, since they were aware of the benefits to their parents of ending their relationship. They were also better able to articulate these ideas than younger children were, and to critically reflect on them, which may have helped them to adjust over time. Children in the older group were also better able to reflect on their role as active contributors to family dynamics, and indeed to have more of a sense of control over what was happening in their family. Younger children were more accepting of parents' decisions about family arrangements. In the older group, by contrast, some of the children rejected the initial decision about residence arrangements, and took steps to ensure that they were able to live with, or have greater access to, the parent they preferred as main caregiver. It was also only children in the older age group who said they had personally made the choice not to have contact with their non-resident parent.

Adolescents were more likely to be drawn into their parents' relationship, in terms of parents confiding details of their interpersonal problems, and to take on a sense of responsibility for the welfare of their parents and for family well-being.

In terms of support, there were age differences in children's experiences and their perceptions of their own needs. Many younger children were quite clear about the ways in which services had helped them to feel less 'different' from other children, often simply by being in the presence of other children whom they knew had similar experiences in their families. Indeed, the coping strategies of children in this group were somewhat different from those of adolescents, in that they relied more on sharing activities and spending time with people whom they believed understood their situation, than in confiding. Their mothers were their most valued source of support. Similar findings have emerged in a recent study by Wade and Smart (2002) in the UK. Older children, especially adolescent girls, disclosed and discussed more with friends than did younger children as a means of coming to a better understanding of the separation, although they too valued parents as the most important source of support. It may be the case that adolescents could also benefit from a peer group model of support provision, which none of the older children in the present sample had experienced. These findings point to the importance of considering the different support needs of children of different ages.

There were age differences in children's responses to questions about what could have helped them. Younger children were less able to imagine what could have helped them in terms of support, and only reiterated the types of support they had already experienced,



*Yeah I feel a bit of relief because I know, like, exactly what's happening.*

Girl, aged 14,  
4 years since  
separation

while adolescents were able to evaluate possible support in terms of what might have been helpful to them, and what additional types of support could also be provided.

These findings reinforce the importance of taking a developmental approach to understanding the meaning of parental separation for children, and to shaping differential and age-appropriate support provision.

*When I found out  
about the divorce  
I knew it was  
going to be  
forever.*

Boy, aged 10,  
8 years since  
separation

### ***Patterns associated with gender***

Some early studies indicated that boys in separated families have more difficulties adapting to this change in family structure than do girls (Guidbaldi, Cleminshaw, Perry, Nastasi & Lightel, 1986; Allison & Furstenburg, 1989). However, other studies suggest that long-term outcomes are more negative for girls than for boys (Rodgers, 1994; McLeod & Shanahan, 1996). It has been suggested that there is a 'sleeper effect' whereby some girls, who initially cope well with family transitions, later experience a significant reversal in adjustment (Wallerstein & Corbin, 1989). This section looks at gender differences in children's responses to parental separation. The main gender patterns evident in the present study were in relation to support. Some differences in effects on relationships with parents and effects on schoolwork were also evident.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, the majority of children in the present sample were recruited with the help of support agencies specialising in services for families experiencing parental separation. One striking difference in terms of gender and contact with support services was that, while relatively equal numbers of boys and girls in the younger age group were involved in the Rainbows programme, only three out of the thirteen boys in the older age group mentioned being in contact with support services. By contrast, the majority of girls in the older age group had been in contact with a service, either at the time of the interview or previously. Furthermore, a higher proportion of girls than boys (25% and 10%, respectively) felt that having access to a counselling service would have helped them at the time of the separation. However, most children who had been in contact with services, regardless of gender, felt that it had helped them in some way. It is not possible to draw solid conclusions from these findings, as it is not clear whether the gender imbalance in the present study in terms of contact with support services is reflected in the wider population. Nevertheless, these findings raise interesting questions in terms of understanding possible gender differences in children's perceptions of support available to them. Does this difference reflect a more general view on the part of boys in adolescence that they do not need additional support from such services? Alternatively, is it more difficult for boys of this age to access support services with ease? These questions are not within the scope of the present report, but they highlight an important area for further investigation.

There was also some evidence of gender differences in perceptions of support from friends. Almost half of the girls interviewed (44%) indicated that friends had helped a lot at the time and since the separation. In contrast to this, 29% of the boys interviewed felt that friends had helped a lot. Similarly, a higher proportion of girls than boys (22% and 12.5%, respectively) mentioned friends as being their main support through the time of their parents' separation. Pryor and Rodgers (2001) point out that boys in particular may find it difficult to tell friends that their parents have separated.

There were no noticeable gender differences in terms of perceived support from parents or siblings in the present study. Most children felt that their resident parent had been able to help them a lot at the time of, and since, the separation. A smaller number felt that their non-resident parent had been able to help them a lot. However, when asked to identify what they felt had been their main support, a higher proportion of girls than boys (35% and 21%, respectively) identified their mother (resident parent) as having helped most.

There was a good deal of similarity in the patterns of relating to parents among boys and girls in the present study. However, a few points are worth noting. A higher proportion of girls than boys (44% and 33%, respectively) felt they got along better with their resident parent after the separation. However, a greater proportion of girls than boys (40% and 16%, respectively) also identified missing their non-resident parent as the main difficulty in the process of their parents' separation.

Fawcett (1998) found that adolescent girls were more likely to have infrequent contact with their fathers following parental separation. In another UK study, fathers were three times as likely to stay involved with boys than with girls (Simpson *et al.*, 1995). This was not the case in the present study, where no clear pattern of gender differences was evident in frequency of contact. It is worth pointing out, however, that all of the three children in the older age group who had chosen to have little or no contact with their non-resident parent following parental separation were girls.

As mentioned in Chapter 7, a minority of children (12, 20%) felt that their school work had been negatively affected by the separation, and these children were equally represented in the younger and older age groups. However, there were some gender differences in these children's accounts of effects on school work. Six children in the younger age group felt that their school work had disimproved as a result of the separation, and all of these were girls. In the older age group, five out of the six children who reported negative effects on their schoolwork were also girls.

Finally, while family finances did not appear to be salient for most children and young people in the present study, approximately one quarter of the boys identified 'having less money' as a significant problem after the separation. None of the girls indicated that this was a problem for them.

It is difficult to say with certainty whether these gender differences are reflected in the wider population, as there was a higher proportion of female than male participants in the present study. It is also important to consider gender differences in the present study in the

context of previous research which suggests that associations between gender and children's well-being following parental separation are not straightforward. Influences, such as socio-economic circumstances and other family relationships, must also be taken into account (Clarke-Stewart, Vandell, McCartney, Owen & Booth, 2000).

### ***Families experiencing multiple difficulties***

As outlined previously, children may have to cope with serious disruption to family routines and relationships when their parents separate. The present sample included thirteen families where parental separation occurred in the context of further adversity, such as domestic violence, alcohol or drug abuse, and mental health problems of parents and/or children. These difficulties represent further stressors and possible barriers to positive adjustment to post separation family life. This section outlines the nature of, and extent to which families were experiencing, multiple difficulties in the present sample. As we did not explicitly ask children to talk to us about difficult family circumstances, our information is based only on those cases where children spontaneously told us about such experiences. It is possible, therefore, that the number of families experiencing multiple difficulties is higher than we can determine in the present study.

### *Physical violence in the home*

Conflict and violence between parents is a source of distress to children, and previous research has pointed to the possible damage and risk to children's well-being when exposed to such conflict. These consequences include behaviour problems, anxiety and depression (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Cummings & Davies, 1994). In the present study, five children (8%) said that there had been physical violence in the home prior to their parents separating. In the case of four of these children, violence was perpetrated by one parent against another; in three families, the perpetrator was the father, and the mother in one case. Three of these children said that they had been hit or physically attacked by a parent. For all children in the present study, the experience of inter-parental conflict was distressing. In these more extreme circumstances, where physical violence was involved, children expressed their difficulty in coping with and recovering from these experiences. One adolescent girl described how she began to engage in self-harming behaviour as a result of the conflict and violence in her home:

*Well there was one or two nights me dad would actually, from a fight that me mam and him would have, he'd turn it on to me ... and he'd hit me ... and, eh, at that stage I was getting really angry and I was getting upset. And I didn't think anyone cared for me or anything ... So eventually I started going onto aerosol cans, knowing what they could do to me.*

(girl, aged 14, 4 years since separation)

Three children who had experienced violence in the home had chosen not to maintain regular contact with their non-resident parent, whom they considered to be the perpetrator of this violence. All of these were girls in the older age group.

#### *Alcohol and drug abuse*

The serious repercussions for families of alcohol and drug abuse by family members was highlighted in *Strengthening Families for Life* (Fahey, 1998). Four children (7%) in the present sample talked of their concerns about excessive drinking by one or both of their parents. In one case, parental drinking was associated with violent behaviour. Two children mentioned drug abuse by a family member; in one case a father, and in the other a brother.

#### *Parents' distress*

Five children (8%) representing four families expressed grave concern about the psychological well-being of one of their parents. Two children, in different families, said that their resident parent had recently attempted suicide. For both of these of these children, there was a sense of isolation and helplessness in the face of a parent's distress. A key problem for them was not being able to talk to their parent(s) as they did not wish to upset them. One fifteen-year-old girl was in contact with support services and described how she felt as follows:

*There's nobody I can really [talk to ]... not really my mum or my dad. I can't really talk about it with them. I come here [support service] to talk about it.*

(girl, aged 15, one year since separation)

Three other children talked about their parent being 'depressed' and said that this was a source of anxiety for them.

#### *Children's distress*

Three adolescents (10% of the older age group) said that they had been extremely upset at the time of the breakdown in their parents' marriage. Two girls said that they had engaged in what might be termed 'at-risk' behaviour; one had felt suicidal at the time of her parents' separation and engaged in behaviour which was self-harming for some time after the separation, while another girl described how she suffered from an eating disorder for some years when her father left. Both girls were in contact with support services at the time of interview and felt they could now cope better with what was happening within their families. A third adolescent girl attributed her aggressive behaviour to her feelings of anger and confusion with regard to the separation.

Pryor and Rodgers (2001) draw attention to the importance of recognising that the impact of adverse family circumstances may be exacerbated around the time of the actual separation. As mentioned previously, our information regarding these family circumstances is quite limited and it is not possible to identify in detail whether these circumstances improved for children following the separation. However, these findings highlight the importance of providing additional support on a number of levels for children living in families experiencing these difficulties.

## KEY FINDINGS

- It is not possible to characterise children's experiences of parental separation as simply negative or positive. Children often had mixed responses to the separation, and these were subject to change over time.
- Most children found *both* parental conflict and parental separation difficult, feeling relieved when they were removed from the impact of conflict, but feeling deep sadness about not living with both parents.
- Children wanted to be kept informed about the changes in their families, though not to be drawn into their parents' relationship difficulties. Many were reluctant to make major decisions about family arrangements.
- Contact with non-resident parents was one of the most important issues for children, often shaping their overall feelings and views about the separation.
- It was important for children to receive reassurances from both parents that they were concerned about the children's well-being and committed to being available for them.
- Parental separation was a private issue for children. They preferred to talk about it with family members or peers with similar experiences, and did not want to stand out as being 'different' from other children.
- Children saw their parents as the most important source of support.
- Most children who had received support from formal services found them to be very helpful.
- Younger children did not necessarily feel the need to talk about their parents' separation, preferring shared activities with people they believed understood their situation. Older children were more likely to find talking about the separation helpful, both with professionals and family and friends.



## DISCUSSION

In conclusion, these data suggest that children can, and do, make considerable adjustments when parents separate, but that there is also scope for a good deal of continuity in family life. The findings also illustrate children's ability to conceptualise family life as organic and subject to multiple influences, including their own.

These findings point to the importance of promoting and supporting stable long-term contact between children and their non-resident parents, and open and ongoing communication within families about the organisation and re-organisation of family life. The findings of the study point, also, to the need for services that can offer support to children and their parents around the time of the separation, and whenever families need assistance to maintain stability and closeness of relationships over time. The findings demonstrate the importance of recognising children's different personalities and their individuality. They highlight the different as well as shared patterns of need across children of different age groups and gender, and the changes that individual children undergo over time in their understanding and perspectives on their parents' separation.

The findings indicate the need for varied forms of service provision that can meet a range of needs within the family; the developmental needs of children, concerns about confidentiality, and support needs of parents. McKeown and Sweeney (2001), in their review of research on family well-being and family policy, conclude that family conflict and instability profoundly and negatively affect children's well-being, and recommend that family policy should actively promote family stability and positive relationships, regardless of the marital status of the parents. The findings of this study of children's experiences of parental separation strongly support this view.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations arising from the findings of this study target four areas:

1. Service provision,
2. Information,
3. Research and evaluation, and
4. The overall family policy approach in respect of parental separation.

### ***Service provision***

A range of support programmes should be developed to address the varied and changing needs of children and families, at the time of parental separation and in the longer term. Existing services need ongoing support. It would be useful to establish closer links between those departments and agencies with an interest in this issue to discuss how service provision could be better co-ordinated and developed. The emerging Family Support Agency,

provided for under the Family Support Agency Act (2001), may be well placed to have a co-ordinating role in terms of bringing together representatives from relevant government departments, and statutory and voluntary bodies.

A broad range of supports is needed for children and their families, including individual counselling and group-support. Services should be available for children and other family members at different stages.

- Different types of service should be offered, including individual and group/family support and telephone services.
- Services should be easily accessible to reduce barriers to access and uptake. They should be available in a wide range of settings, should be locally accessible, and should be affordable (including services provided on a sliding scale, and free services supported by the government).
- Services should be accessible on a quick response basis at the time of separation.
- Information on parental separation should be widely disseminated.

The following service needs have been identified:

#### *Services for children*

Services for children should:

- Offer individual and/or group counselling for children of all ages.
- Provide peer support groups.
- Facilitate children who wish to attend on an occasional basis.
- Offer non-specialist programmes that do not target or highlight separation, to cater for children who are concerned about being stigmatised by association with specialist services.
- Provide support for younger children with an emphasis on shared activities, rather than on talking.
- Incorporate a variety of settings, including school and non-school.
- Offer age-appropriate information about parental separation provided by trained professionals.

It should be recognised that many children may not need or wish to attend formal services, or may wish to attend services at different stages of the transition, as needs arise.

### *Services for parents*

Services for parents should:

- Provide post-separation counselling and information services to help them to communicate and maintain positive relationships with their children over time, and to help them to understand their children's changing concerns and needs over time. Post-separation parenting courses may also be helpful.
- Cater for the different needs and concerns of both resident and non-resident parents, and the different needs of parents who co-parent and those who parent alone.
- Facilitate increased contact between children and non-resident parents, for example, through the provision of appropriate and non-stigmatising settings for children and parents to meet, with child-centred facilities.
- Address the support needs of step-families.
- Provide for parents with learning disabilities or literacy needs.

### *Support for families with additional needs*

In addition to parental separation, some families experience difficulties such as domestic violence, alcohol or drug abuse, and/or mental health or other problems. Such families may have special service needs. They may also, however, be less likely to approach services, particularly those specialising in issues of marital breakdown, due to the pressures of other social, psychological and/or economic difficulties. To facilitate families with special needs or multiple difficulties, services should:

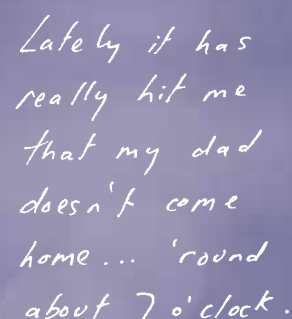
- Be better integrated.
- Promote what they offer, and encourage uptake, perhaps through outreach work.
- Ensure that additional training is made available on issues relating to parental separation to staff in agencies providing support for a broad range of family problems.

### **Information**

#### *Public awareness*

Measures should be taken to reduce children's sense of being isolated and 'different' from other children as this is a major barrier to children seeking support at present. The following measure is recommended.

- Bring together an advisory group on the dissemination of information on parental



Lately it has  
really hit me  
that my dad  
doesn't come  
home... 'round  
about 7 o'clock.

Girl, aged 13,  
4 years since  
separation

*You see, when your parents get on great,  
everything else is great.*

Boy, aged 16, 1 year since separation

separation and divorce, drawing representatives from statutory and non-statutory agencies, and from the research domain. Such a group could advise on strategies for raising awareness about family experiences of parental separation, and on the provision of accessible information for children, parents, teachers and other professionals about legislation, services, and research on parental separation and divorce.

#### *Information design*

There is a need for a package of easily accessible and meaningful information for children and parents. It should be available on the web, in hard copy, on video, and in audiocassette format. This package could be compiled under the auspices of a statutory agency, such as the Family Support Agency (FSA) or Comhairle, or under a non-statutory agency providing support services to families. The package should include the following:

- Information on the range of services available, costs, how to access services, what they offer, and how they might be useful.
- Research findings on the effects of separation on children, parents and extended families.
- Information leaflets suitable for younger and older children. These should also be made widely available through schools, libraries, youth services, social service agencies, and other outlets.

#### *Information dissemination*

- The information should be delivered by well-trained information providers who could be based in a range of different organisations, e.g. counselling centres, family resource centres, court services and health centres, and offered by a range of professionals.
- There is potential for schools to play an important role in dissemination of information about support services for children of separated parents. All schools should be provided with a list of accredited counsellors for referral purposes for children who will not/cannot avail themselves of school counselling. Schools are also in a position to create greater awareness of variation in family forms through provision of information and through awareness-raising campaigns that facilitate children learning about non-traditional family forms (perhaps through school-based projects).

- Training on information delivery should be provided. The statutory agency Comhairle may be well placed to take on the role of coordination and delivery of training. Professionals interviewing children who want to participate in decision-making about family arrangements post-separation should have specialised training in direct work with children, and be guided by a code of professional practice.

### ***Research and evaluation***

Provision should be made for ongoing research and evaluation of supports for children and their families. Research should be commissioned on:

- The profile of service uptake by children, examining trends in age and gender, and also among families with multiple problems, such as poverty, domestic violence, and substance misuse. Barriers to service uptake should be identified.
- The support needs of separated parents, both resident and non-resident, and both co-parenting and parenting alone.
- Children's experiences of court processes in connection with parental separation and divorce. Such research should investigate the nature of children's participation in court processes, the extent to which the legal process is clear and meaningful to them, and their support needs.

There is also a need for longitudinal research on children's experiences of separation and divorce in Ireland.

### ***Family policy***

Parental separation has psychological, legal and socio-economic implications for children and their families. In *Strengthening Families for Life*, it is recommended that 'social provisions for families and developments in family law ... should be planned and developed in tandem with each other' (Fahey, 1998: 401). This principle should be followed with regard to family policy in the area of parental separation.

- Family policy should be coordinated with legislative developments and service planning. While there are many challenges in successfully integrating and coordinating provision and policy across different public bodies, it seems essential that such integration and co-ordination is given high priority.

### ***Policy emphasis***

The needs and rights of both children and parents should be given due consideration in the development of family policy on parental separation and divorce. Family policy in this area should be child-centred and take account of the developmental needs and the rights of individual children. As such, the strategy should be integrated with the National Children's

Strategy (2000), and should be underpinned by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was ratified by Ireland in 1992. Irish family policy should:

- Define and protect the rights of children under Irish law, through legislation. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 9.3, sets out children’s right to ‘maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis, except if it is contrary to the child’s best interests.’
- Develop and promote respect for children as active participants in family life, with due consideration for the complexity of the issue of children’s participation in decision-making about family arrangements.
- Promote an ethos of lifelong parental responsibility for children, regardless of parents’ marital status. Such responsibility should be underpinned by legislation that defines the responsibilities of both parents post-separation.
- Define and protect the rights of both parents with regard to access to contact with children, through legislation.
- Adjust the language used in family policy and legislation about parental obligations and entitlements from ‘custody and access’ to ‘responsibility and contact’.
- Identify and address any barriers to the maintenance of regular contact between children and non-resident parents in the current social welfare system.
- Encourage continuity and stability in children’s family relationships, including those with members of extended families.
- Promote co-operation between parents in decision-making about the re-organisation of family life after separation.
- Encourage parents, as far as it is possible and desirable, to develop collaborative parenting relationships.

In conclusion, it is hoped that a more proactive family policy environment will lead to a clearer and more cohesive policy for the support of children and their parents in post-separation and divorce families, thus providing children with greater stability in their family relationships, and increased social and psychological well-being.

## REFERENCES

adjustment  
stability  
relationship  
security  
contact  
communication  
involvement  
family

## REFERENCES

- Amato, P. (2001). Children of divorce in the 1990s: An update of the Amato and Keith (1991) meta-analysis. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 15, 3, 355-370.
- Allison, P.D. & Furstenberg, F.F. (1989). How marital dissolution affects children: Variations by age and sex. *Developmental Psychology*, 25, 540-9.
- Bretherton, I. & Watson, M.W. (1990). Children's perspectives on the family. *New Directions for Child Development*, 48. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Butler, I. (1996). Children and the sociology of childhood, pp. 1-18, in I. Butler & I. Shaw (Eds) *A case of neglect: Children's experiences and the sociology of childhood*. Aldershot: Avebury.
- Clarke-Stewart, K.A., Vandell, D.L., McCartney, K., Owen, M.T. & Booth, C. (2000). Effects of parental separation and divorce on very young children. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 14: 304-26.
- Courts Service (2001). *Annual Report*. Dublin: Courts Service Information Office.
- Cummings, E.M. & Davies, P. (1994). *Children and marital conflict: The impact of family dispute and resolution*. New York: Guildford Press.
- Dunn, J. & Deater-Deckard, K. (2001). *Children's views of their changing families*. York: The Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Elliot, J. & Richards, M.P. (1991). Children and divorce: Educational performance and behaviour before and after parental separation. *International Journal of Law and the Family*, 5: 258-276.
- Fahey, T. (1998). *Strengthening families for life: Report of The Commission on the Family*. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- Fahey, T. & Lyons, M. (1995). *Marital breakdown and family law in Ireland: A sociological study*. Dublin: Oak Tree Press in association with The Economic and Social Research Institute.
- Fahey, T. & Russell, H. (2001). Family formation in Ireland: Trends, data needs and implications. *ESRI Policy Research Series No. 43*. Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute.
- Fawcett, M. (1998). *What hurts? What helps?: A study of needs and services for young people whose parents separate and divorce*. Belfast: RelateTeen.
- Fine-Davis, M. (1988). Changing gender role attitudes in Ireland 1975-86, vol. III: Attitudes to moral issues in relation to voting behaviour in recent referenda. In *Third Report of the Second Joint Committee on Women's Health*. Dublin: Stationery Office.



- Fitzgerald, G. (1999). Marriage in Ireland today. In: D. Lane (Ed.), *New century, new society: Christian perspectives*. Dublin: The Columba Press.
- Furstenberg, F. & Teitler, J. (1994). Reconsidering the effects of marital disruption: What happens to children of divorce in early adulthood? *Journal of Family Issues*, 15, (2): 173-190.
- Garbarino, J. & Stott, F.M. (1992). *What children can tell us: Eliciting, interpreting and evaluating critical information from children*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Government of Ireland (1937). *Bunreacht na hÉireann*. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- Government of Ireland (1989). *Judicial Separation and Family Law Reform Act, 1989*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.
- Government of Ireland (1991). *Child Care Act, 1991*. Dublin :The Stationery Office.
- Government of Ireland (1995). *Amendment of the Constitution Act, 1995*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.
- Government of Ireland (1996). *Family Law (Divorce) Act, 1996*. Dublin :The Stationery Office.
- Government of Ireland (2001). *Family Support Agency Act, 2001*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.
- Greene, S.M. (1995). Marital breakdown and divorce: the psychological consequences for adults and their children. In: M. O'Brien (Ed.), *Divorce: Facing the issues of marital break-down*. Dublin: Basement Press.
- Greene, S.M. & Moane, G. (2000). Growing up Irish: Development in context. *Irish Journal of Psychology*, 21: 122-137.
- Grych, J.H. & Fincham, F.D. (1990). Marital conflict and children's adjustment: A cognitive contextual framework. *Psychological Bulletin*, 108: 267-90.
- Grych, J.H. (1998). Children's appraisals of inter-parental conflict: situational and contextual influences. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 12: 437-53.
- Guidbaldi, J., Cleminshaw, H., Perry, J., Nastasi, B. & Lightel, J. (1986). The role of selected family environment factors in children's post-divorce adjustment. *Family Relations*, 35: 141-151.
- Haskey, J. (1994a). Estimated numbers of one-parent families and their prevalence in Great Britain in 1991. *Population Trends*, 78: 5-19.
- Haskey, J. (1994b). Stepfamilies and stepchildren in Great Britain. *Population Trends*, 76: 17-28.
- Hetherington, E.M. (1989). The role of individual differences and family relationships in children's coping with divorce and remarriage. In: P.A. Cowan & E.M. Hetherington (Eds), *Family transitions*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Hetherington, E.M. & Stanley-Hagan, M. (1999). The adjustment of children with divorced parents: A risk and resiliency perspective. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 40: 129-40.
- Hill, M. (1998). Ethical issues in qualitative methodology with children. In: D. Hogan & R. Gilligan (Eds). *Researching children's experiences: Qualitative approaches* (pp. 11-22). Dublin: The Children's Research Centre.
- Hogan, D. (1998). Valuing the child in research: historical and current influences on research methodology with children. In: D. Hogan & R. Gilligan (Eds) *Researching children's experiences: Qualitative approaches* (pp. 1-9). Dublin: The Children's Research Centre.
- Hogan, D., Etz, K. & Tudge, R.H. (1999). Reconsidering the role of children in family: conceptual and methodological issues. *Contemporary perspectives on family research*, vol. 1, (pp. 93-105). Stamford, CT: JAI Press.
- Ireland (2000). *The National Children's Strategy: Our children – their lives*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.
- Kiely, G. (1995). Family research in Ireland. In: I. Colgan McCarthy (Ed.), *Irish Family Studies: Selected papers* (pp. 11-26). Dublin: Family Studies Centre, UCD.
- Kiely, G. & Richardson, V. (1995). Family policy in Ireland. In: I. Colgan McCarthy (Ed.), *Irish Family Studies: Selected papers* (pp. 27-48). Dublin: Family Studies Centre, UCD.
- Kurdek, L. & Berg, B. (1987). Children's beliefs about parental divorce scale: Psychometric characteristics and concurrent validity. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 55: 712-18.
- Maccoby, E., Depner, C. & Mnookin, R. (1990). Co-parenting in the second year after divorce. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 52: 141-55.
- McCoy, K. & Nelson, M. (1983). *Social services departments and Matrimonial Causes (NI) Order*. Belfast: Department of Health and Social Services (NI).
- McDonald, M. (1990). Children's perceptions of access and their adjustment in the post-separation period. *Family Court of Australia, Research Report No. 9*.
- McKeown, K. & Sweeney, J. (2001). *Family well-being and family policy: A review of research on benefits and costs*. Dublin: Government Publications Office.
- McLeod, J.D. & Shanahan, M.J. (1996). Trajectories of poverty and children's mental health. *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour*, 37: 207-20.
- McWilliams, M. & McKiernan, J. (1993). *Bringing it out in the open: Domestic violence in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: HMSO.
- Mitchell, A. (1985). *Children in the middle: Living through divorce*. London: Tavistock Publications.

- Moore, M., Sixsmith, J. & Knowles, K. (1996). *Children's reflections on family life*. London: The Falmer Press.
- Neale, B. & Smart, C. (1998). Agents or dependents?: Struggling to listen to children in family law and family research, *Working paper, Centre for Research on Family, Kinship and Childhood*. Leeds: University of Leeds.
- Nolan, B. (2000). *Child poverty in Ireland*. Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency.
- Nolan, B. & Farrell, B. (1990). *Child poverty in Ireland*. Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency.
- O'Riordan, S. (2001). *Supporting parenting: A study of parent's support needs*. Dublin: The Centre for Social and Educational Research, Dublin Institute of Technology.
- Pryor, J. & Rodgers, B. (2001). *Children in changing families: Life after parental separation*. Oxford: Blackwell Press.
- Rodgers, B. (1994). Pathways between parental divorce and adult depression. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 35: 1,289-1,308.
- Rodgers, B. & Pryor, J. (1998). *Divorce and separation: The outcomes for children*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Seltzer, J. (1991). Relationships between fathers and children who live apart: The father's role after separation. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 53: 79-102.
- Simpson, B., McCarthy, P. & Walker, J. (1995). *Being there: Fathers after divorce*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: University of Newcastle, Relate Centre for Family Studies.
- Smart, C. & Neale, B. (1999). *Family fragments?* Cambridge: Polity.
- Smart, C., Neale, B. & Wade, A. (2001). *The changing experience of childhood: Families and divorce*. Cambridge UK: Polity Press.
- Smith, A.B., Taylor, N.J., Gallop, M., Gaffney, M., Gold, M. & Heneghan, M. (1997). *Access and other post-separation issues*. Dunedin, New Zealand: Children's Issues Centre.
- Smith, A.B. & Gollop, M.M. (2001). What children think separating parents should know. *New Zealand Journal of Psychology*, vol. 30, 1: 23-31.
- Spence, L. (1996). *All alone: The health and social care needs of lone parents*. Belfast: Gingerbread & Northern Ireland Social Services Board.
- Wade, A. & Smart, C. (2002). *Facing family change: Children's circumstances, strategies and resources*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Walczak, Y. & Burns, S. (1984). *Divorce: The child's point of view*. London: Harper and Row.
- Wallerstein, J.S. & Corbin, S.B. (1989). Daughters of divorce: Report from a ten-year follow-up. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 59: 593-604.
- Wallerstein, J.S. & Kelly, J.B. (1980). *Surviving the breakup: How children and parents cope with divorce*. New York: Basic Books.

- Walls, M. & Bergin, D. (1997). *The law of divorce in Ireland*. Bristol: Jordan Publishing Ltd.
- Whiteside, M.F. (1998). The parental alliance following divorce: An overview. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 24, (1): 3-24.
- Wood, K. & O'Shea, P. (1997). *Divorce in Ireland*. Dublin: The O'Brien Press.

## APPENDICES

adjustment  
stability  
relationship  
security  
contact  
communication  
involvement  
family

## APPENDIX A: OVERVIEW OF SELECTED SERVICE PROVISION FOR CHILDREN OF SEPARATED PARENTS

While there is a wide range of services available in Ireland to families needing support, the number of agencies with dedicated provision for supporting children of separated parents is small. The following agencies either provide a dedicated service for children of separated parents, or may offer support indirectly through their families.

### ***The Family Mediation Service***

The Family Mediation Service was set up in 1986 and has centres throughout the country. It provides a facility, for couples wishing to separate, to negotiate issues relating to children, in addition to all practical matters arising out of separation such as financial issues, the family home, etc. Couples are referred through solicitors, social workers, health workers, GPs or friends. The role of the mediator is to act as facilitator rather than actively offering advice. Issues such as communication with children, access and visiting arrangements are discussed, and consideration is given as to how best to enable both parents to continue their involvement with their children. At the end of the process, couples are given a mediation agreement which sets out their agreement in user-friendly language.

### ***ACCORD***

ACCORD provides a counselling service primarily for married couples who are experiencing difficulties. A pilot scheme was set up to provide a counselling service for children (aged 4 years through adolescence) whose parents are in the process of separating. The scheme operated for three years in Dublin, Belfast, Limerick, Tralee and Drogheda. At present, ACCORD has decided not to continue this service.

### ***Teen Between***

Teen Between was set up in 1995 within MRCS (Marriage & Relationship Counselling Service) as part of an initiative to make the service more accessible to young people. Teen Between offers a counselling service for young people (12-18 years) whose parents have separated or are in the process of separating. Most young people are referred through their parents or guidance counsellors. Much of the work focuses on the parent-child relationship. Until recently, Teen Between operated in Dublin alone. However, it has now linked up with the National Youth Federation and is in the process of training youth workers in information centres around the country.

### ***Rainbows***

Rainbows has been operating in Ireland since 1988. It is a school-based programme and offers peer group support to children and young people in bereavement and parental separation situations. Rainbows provides an opportunity for children to work through a structured programme using materials such as journals, storybooks, games and activities. At

present there are 365 sites around the country located in schools, parish and community centres.

***Horizon Group Programme (Clanwilliam Institute)***

Horizon is a group programme for children and adolescents (aged 7-11) who are coping with the separation of their parents. Children's feelings are explored using a range of exercises and games, and children are encouraged to choose the medium they prefer, e.g. art, writing, photographs, music, etc.

***Families in Transition Programme (Lucena Clinics)***

The FIT programme aims to provide a supportive environment for children and parents in situations of divorce and separation. It emphasises the importance of developing parental competence by teaching skills to handle children's divorce-related concerns, co-parental relationships and parent-child relationships. The programmes are led by a trained facilitator in a community setting which provides easy access (e.g. family community centre). However, it is not run on a regular basis and provision of the service is dependent upon existing demand at a particular time.

***Young Adults Beginning Experiences (YABE)***

This programme is designed to help young adults deal with situations of bereavement and parental separation. It is a self-help programme which runs over one week-end. YABE operates in Dublin alone, although programmes have included participants from many parts of the country. The programme is not run on a regular basis.

***Barnardos***

A number of other family or child support services, which deal with parental separation among a range of other issues, are also available to families. Among these is Barnardos (Ireland), which was set up in 1968 and aims to promote the welfare of children and families, especially those experiencing disadvantage. While Barnardos does not deal specifically with parental separation issues, it recognises the need to provide such a service. It caters for children of all ages from pre-school to late teens. Services include crèche, pre-school and an after-school service for older children. Centres have been established in Dublin, Waterford, Cork, Limerick and Edenderry.

***Other services***

Other services include Childline (ISPCC), Child and Family Centres, Mater Dei counselling services, and Child and Family Centres provided under the National Social Services Board (operated through the Child Guidance Clinics and run by local health boards).

## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

(adapted as appropriate to children's age)

### Personal information

Age

Where you live (how long have you lived there and what do you like about it?)

School and school class

Hobbies and interests

### Description/Narrative of separation process

*Before your parents separated:*

- Family composition (place in family, number of sisters and brothers, who else was living with the family)
- Roles and relationships (who looked after you, made your lunch, took you to school, etc?)
- Contact with other family members (your contact with grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins on both sides of the family?)
- Awareness of parental difficulties (what kinds of things did you notice, if anything, and when did you start to notice?)
- Communicating news of separation to you (who told you that your parents were going to separate? When were you told? How/what were you told?)
- Communicating news of separation to others (what did your parents say about telling other people? What were their views on other people knowing, within the family and outside the family?)
- Reactions of others (how did other people react when they found out? In the family, among your friends?)
- Memory of the separation event (what do you remember about the day your parents separated? e.g. did you all move, did one parent move out?)
- Your role in decision making (what kinds of things did your parents ask you about? how was it decided where you would live and how often you would see your father/mother after the separation?)
- Current family status/arrangements (since the separation, and now, who do you live with, who looks after you, what kind of contact with the parent you do not live with, what kind of contact with the rest of your family, especially relatives on side of non-resident parent?)



## **Support**

- Who gave you support? (Who did you talk to at the time about what was going on and any concerns you had?)
- What support was available? (Who else could you have turned to? what kind of information were you given about available support?)

## **Practical consequences of separation**

*After your parents separated, what changes did you experience in the following areas:*

How has your parents' separation affected your life?

- Family routine
- Residence
- Contact and relationships with family and friends
- Financial/economic circumstances
- Holidays and outings
- Your family responsibilities

## **Support**

- Who gave you support? (Who did you talk to about these changes?)
- What support was available? (Who else could you have turned to? in the family and outside the family?)

## **Understanding of separation process**

(ask about time **before** the separation, **during** the process, and then **afterwards**)

Awareness

- (When did you first become aware that your parents were separating (before you were told, after?)
- Beliefs about cause and fault
- Beliefs about nature of separation
- Beliefs about parents' relationship
- Expectations about custody
- Expectations about continuing relationships and contact with non-resident parent
- Expectations about future family composition
- Beliefs about legal implications and processes

## **Support**

Who gave you support? (Who did you talk to about your understanding of separation?)

What support was available? (Who else could you have turned to? in the family and outside the family?)

## **Feelings about parental separation**

(explain why you felt this way)

How has the separation affected your feelings about

- Your relationship with your father
- Your relationship with your mother
- Your relationship with your sisters and brothers

## **Coping with parental separation**

- What support/services were you aware of throughout the process?
- What were the main sources of support you used, informal and formal (close family extended family, friends, school, services)?
- What were the main difficulties you experienced?
- What is your overall assessment of the support available and received by you?
- What support would you like now?





Department of Social & Family Affairs



the children's research centre  
TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN