

“Do You See What I See?” by Dr David Pitcher

This article is written by Dr David Pitcher, Family Court Adviser, Plymouth; Honorary Social Work Adviser to the Grandparents' Association and reproduced with kind permission of *Seen and Heard*

As Ben's father shared with me the smiling photographs of their holiday together, it was hard to think that, when I had interviewed him, Ben had insisted that he did not want any contact with his father at all, and did not even want to answer telephone calls from him.

To those with a particular responsibility to understand and represent the 'wishes and feelings' of a child, cases like Ben's are of special importance; yet I have found that most of the current approaches are unsatisfactory, in that they misunderstand what is really going on both for the parents and for the child. In this article, I suggest a model of working that I find helpful. I am focusing on children aged between four and twelve, as this seems to constitute the major part of our work: younger children can be moved from one parent to another without obvious complaint, and older children are able to make their own decisions and arrangements independently of the parent with residence. I want to be clear that I am not talking about situations in which having contact would pose a significant risk to a child, including where there is domestic abuse. However, in many of the situations I describe, there has been difficult behaviour of various kinds, whether actual or alleged.

The majority of separated and divorced parents, even those who have experienced mutual acrimony, are able to come together in a parenting alliance and a child can, ideally, 'move between family members without ill-ease or disloyalty' (Re B [2009] EWCA Civ 545, Wall LJ at para 67). Indeed, Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) found that most children were eager to see the non-resident parent. In many other situations, contact is lost, or almost so. This may not be an ideal situation for the child, but at least there is no stress or disagreement about contact. But there are others, however, for whom contact is never agreed. It is these families, with whom we are so often called to work, that I am discussing here. Consider these three cases, taken from many similar cases with which I have worked in the last few months:

Whenever Jake, four, arrived back from his mother's, he told his father that he was terrified of the big, fierce dog at his mother's and that it messed in the house and garden. He begged his father not to take him to his mother's, and when his father did so, he became hysterical and was sick in the car. Jake told his mother that he wanted to live with her and her new partner, because Daddy never played with him and he liked being with Mummy's new puppy. I observed Jake playing happily in both homes, with no apparent concern, and he drew a beautiful picture of himself with each family, including the dog! Both parents made child protection referrals and sought sole residence.

Kayla, nine, lived with her mother and had contact with her father and his new partner. Whenever Kayla returned from contact, she threw her arms around her mother in relief and said how glad she was to be back. She asked

for reassurances that her stepmother would not take part in the contact. As the time for the next contact drew nearer, Kayla would develop stomach pains. However, at her father's, she would talk about how boring life was at her mother's and how she would like much longer contact with her father, possibly even to live with him. She drew cards for her stepmother, full of hearts and kisses. I arranged to see Kayla at both homes, but she wrote a letter begging me not to interview her.

Esmee, eight, told me that she would jump out of her bedroom window if she was forced to see her father. His home was filthy, she said, and her father 'smelled of beer'. When I took Esmee to see her father, she ran up to him and hugged him. At the end of the contact, she did not want to leave. Yet, when the time came for her next contact, she refused to go.

What is striking in these situations is that everyone involved is completely sure that it is they who fully understands the child. However, what each one sees is different. The result is often many months of bitter legal proceedings, incurring great expense. I became determined to think more about what life might really be like for Jake, Kayla and Esmee, and the many others with whom we work.

The child's experience

Being loyal to one's family is one of the most fundamental motivations we have. In one school of family therapy, recognising and working with this 'invisible fabric of loyalty' (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Goldenthal, 1996) is one of the key tasks in working with a family. A sense of belonging is perhaps our deepest need. Its opposite is isolation and betrayal: a child will experience anxiety about any hint of disloyalty (Buchanan et al., 1991). The rights and wrongs of the case must be made to fit. From within their family group, members may seek to project unwanted feelings onto another person or group and an ex-partner is ideally placed for this. Thus, for a young child, unquestioning loyalty toward their immediate family is natural, while dislike of the 'others' enables this family group to be idealised. The child's 'other' family, of course, will also expect loyalty and may be viewing the child's family of residence in a similar way. A child is caught between primal forces of immense power that few adults are called to manage (Buchanan et al., 1991). I have noticed that many children who have to pass from one family 'world' to another describe their experience in terms of stomach pains, as though the whole experience is impossible to 'digest'.

Another aspect of a child's experience is that the adult caring for them dominates his or her world. This is true in terms of physical size and equally in terms of the adult's greater ability to understand, interpret and influence the world. In his novel, *What Maisie Knew*, in which a young girl is involved in a bitter divorce, Henry James (1897) describes how Maisie conforms to the views of whichever adult she is with and each adult's 'presence is like an object brought so close to her face that she could not see round its edges'.

The other parent may be thought of as a balancing 'counterpresence' (Lowenstein, 2010), but in cases in which there is high conflict, this simply forces the child to live in two different worlds, seeing things differently in each. Any expression of fondness for the alien parent risks the child being seen as a stranger in the camp, outside the main core of the family – a terrifying prospect. By contrast, any expression of dislike towards the other parent confirms the child's place in the heart of the family. The parent's view of the child is shaped

by her or his own needs to project everything that is negative outside the family. How a child responds can be shown to relate to his or her developmental stage. In a very helpful contribution to the literature, Janet Johnston (1993) suggests that, from the age of four, a child is beginning to understand that people have viewpoints that are different, but the child cannot think simultaneously about two people having different viewpoints. The child of this age also finds mixed or complex viewpoints difficult to comprehend. This leads to a child having rapidly shifting alliances, depending on who he or she is with. From the age of about seven, a child's capacity for 'self-reflexive' thinking provides the ability to comprehend the incompatibility of parents' opposing views and also to be able to think about how the parents will view the child's actions – 'Will Dad feel I don't love him as much as Mum if I spend more time with her?' It is thus at this age that the child will experience acute loyalty conflicts, leading to both sadness and powerlessness. From the age of about nine, the child may form an alliance with one parent as a way of dealing with this sense of pain. This is when children may refuse to see a parent. In theory, by middle teenage years, the young person's greater cognitive skills can enable independent decision-making and the withdrawal from parental disputes. However, there are many cases in which a child is unable to do this. In situations where the child's two families represent hostile camps, I have noticed that there is often a reliance on accounts of incidents, which may have happened a long time ago, in order to justify their position. The child can often recite these, and the stories are brought up in an almost identical form at every opportunity: 'Daddy's nasty because he was driving too fast and didn't put my seatbelt on', or 'I don't like Mummy because she was late and I was scared.' I have come to think of these as 'static' or 'fossilised' incidents, because they are often relied on without context, may have happened a long time ago, and bear little relation to the current situation. They are not reappraised as they would be in ordinary family life because they are necessary to the parent's position. The child who is caught up in this situation is very active in maintaining and reinforcing it. It is not the case that the parent does not allow the child to express his or her 'true' wishes, or is deliberately 'poisoning' or at least 'coaching' the child in any calculating, cynical way, as is usually implied. A child will, in the most sincere fashion, present a picture of the other parent that fits with the requirements of living in his or her family. This enables that parent to see their views reflected back by the child, and allows them to maintain their view of the world. The parent may even profess to support contact, but that it is the child who must decide. These children will often be quite happy to talk to a professional at either home, or in somewhere associated with the home, but will become anxious if asked to give their view in a truly neutral place. I question whether it is really fair to put a child in this position. To describe this phenomenon is not to endorse it. The ultimate cost to a child of having to put on this 'false self' (Winnicott, 1989) is extremely high and ultimately unsustainable. These children may become self-destructive in adolescence (Miller, 1987), or at least lose their ability to be spontaneous and creative (Winnicott, 1989). Their experience is that they cannot distinguish their own minds from their parents'. I asked one adult, who had grown up in such a family, to describe her experience: 'It is like they are putting on a play, and you become part of that play. Then you start mistrusting what you are thinking. You end up not trusting what the adults say, but you can't say anything because you are part of the play.'

Johnston et al. (1987) described these children as 'disturbed in a unique manner' by virtue of being in the centre of the dispute: they are both vulnerable and grandiosely powerful. It is a very lonely position, not fully belonging anywhere. The court process can reinforce this.

Some older children can use this position a little perversely, by causing trouble between their parents, who consequently overreact because they are locked into their defensive systems. The child then can become powerful, exploiting the situation, perhaps as an expression of anger. In all three of the cases cited above, the child returned from the other parent saying that they had been inadequately fed and demanded a big meal. Thus, this allegation of neglect was added to the list of each parent's concerns.

The parent's perspective

The parent with the child's care often feels deeply hurt by the other parent. There may have been insensitivity, violence and betrayal. Earlier hopes and dreams have been lost:

'Divorce tears at the very fabric of who we are, and how – sometimes even why – we live. It's like a giant shredder from which our past life emerges in tatters.' (Cohen, 2007, p viii)

Strong feelings are not surprising. One way of dealing with them is by a complete rejection and demonisation of the other parent. As time goes on, the parent begins to function as a symbol for all that is terrible. I am consistently surprised at how different the parent I meet is to the person portrayed by the other parent. This rejection may come to include everyone and everything associated with the ex-partner – not only new partners, grandparents and half-siblings, but tastes in music, political views and geographical areas. Children have a special significance, because they have represented the joint hopes of the two parents, so they must be seen to share in the rejection, or be under suspicion. Unlike other things such as shared possessions or finances, the existence of a child can undermine any sense of closure and finality, which may be a genuine psychological need for the parent. Thus, to hear such a child expressing relief on return from contact, or describing inadequate care, can be immensely gratifying.

When people are hurt or anxious, they become less open to new ideas and less curious. One parent recently told me that she was not interested in whether the new half-siblings were boys or girls, or what their names were. Others express suspicion at progress made in therapy. I find that it is possible to identify 'stuck' cases by the way a parent will cling to stories and accounts, showing little curiosity about how the situation may have changed. This is because these stories are necessary. The parent will not wish to disconfirm these by, for example, meeting with people who know the other parent, or the other parent having any relationship with people within their support system. People who are hurt are also less able to recognise pain and hurt in others (Goldenthal, 1996). This is how the two totally different worlds develop – and somehow a young child is expected to inhabit both.

For parents in this position, the link with their child can be intense. It is common for them to miss each other terribly even for a separation of a few hours. From a psychodynamic perspective, it requires a level of maturity to be able to accept that your child can have a relationship from which you are excluded. Many parents feel that, in having contact with the other parent, the

child is being polluted or contaminated. It is common for parents to change a child's clothes on return from contact. I was told of one mother who ritually gave her daughter a lavender bath as soon as she came back. If the child senses this need, criticising the other parent can feel like a tremendous relief to the parent with care, thus setting up a self-reinforcing cycle.

It is often stated that the courts have, historically, tended to favour mothers in contact disputes. If this was the case, it was at least partly in order to avoid these situations, following the best psychological advice available at the time:

'Visitation is a source of discontinuity for a child ... Children have difficulty in relating positively to ... two psychological parents who are not in positive contact with each other ... Once it is determined who will be the custodial parent, it is that parent, not the court, who must decide under what conditions he or she wishes to raise the child ...' (Goldstein, Freud and Solnit, 1973, p 38).

A critique of current approaches

What I have sought to show is that where contact becomes a source of bitter dispute, these situations arise from and are maintained by the deepest-seated human needs. This includes the views the child expresses. These cases often come before the courts and it is understandable that a court, where reasoned argument is what is valued, is going to seek to understand what is going on in terms of reason. Solutions based on reason are also proposed. It is easiest for professionals to believe that situations can be resolved simply, or that people are acting deliberately and in ways they can immediately control. Unless these situations are properly understood for what they are, it can be unfair on everybody. 'Mere reasonableness' (Jung, 1954, p 374) may just not penetrate deeply enough, whatever orders are made. However the situation looks from the outside, from within, the child's parent passionately and sincerely believes that he or she must protect the child. There may well be a history to back up such concerns, ranging from poor punctuality, through lack of skill in caring for the child, to addiction and threatening behaviour.

A common but misleading assumption is that the child's 'true' wishes exist and can be obtained by digging down deep enough. The skilled Cafcass officer is thought to have the tools to find these 'true' wishes and can tell the court what the child 'really' thinks. In fact, young children in these high-conflict situations have multiple and contradictory views, which they express at different times depending on what has been happening and whose world they are inhabiting. By pushing too hard, the Cafcass officer could unwittingly be part of the process whereby an inaccurate picture of the child's wishes is provided.

The Cafcass Safeguarding Framework (2009) emphasises children's rights: 'The promotion of Children's Rights is the key to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children, and safeguarding cannot be fully effective unless there is consideration of the child's perspective, and unless children are provided with appropriate opportunities to participate in the processes which relate to them.'

This is right in most cases, but care must be taken when working with young children in high-conflict cases that it is not just a question of recording what the child says. Rather, the task should be to represent and describe the child's whole experience to the court.

Cafcass has designed a Parenting Information Programme, which a court

can order a parent to attend via a contact activity direction (s11A Children Act 1989). This is a well-constructed set of sessions which provides, as its name suggests, information about a child's need to have a strong relationship with both parents. Yet I have found that this 'reasonableness' is no match for the powerful forces at work in some families.

Legal advocates may seek to prove that a parent is 'implacably hostile', or that this is a case of 'parental alienation' (Gardner, 1987). They may try to show that a mother has deliberately 'programmed' a child to reject contact. Although there are some cases in which a parent does cynically coach a child, for example, *V v V, (children) (intractable contact dispute) 2004, EWHC 1215 (Fam)*, my experience is that in the overwhelming number of situations, a parent-child interaction has arisen which has become necessary to maintain the parents' sense of psychological safety. This may not be healthy or fair on the child, but it cannot be dealt with by information and by 'mere reasonableness'.

One expert whose work has been influential recently is consultant child, adolescent and family psychiatrist Dr Kirk Weir, who has shown that, in cases in which children are expressing a wish not to have contact, a robust approach by the court in ordering contact can apparently break through this (Cole, 2009). Weir, and others who advocate 'breaking through' children's resistance (see, for example, Lowenstein, 2010) say that limited weight should be placed on the simply stated 'wishes of the child'. Dr Weir says that it helps if the contact takes place for a minimum of two hours, and the children are collected from a neutral venue. He describes one such case:

'Initially, the children would not even look their father in the eye. After forty-five minutes, the boy was persuaded to join in a game with his father; the girl observed, and then joined in later. Both children began to stare at their father. Gradually, they began to converse with him, including discussing past memories of home life. When the children returned home, the boy told his mother that he had been "made" to play a game with his father and the mother was furious.' (Cole, 2009, p 29)

This observation fits exactly with my own experience when observing some contact sessions, but my reservation is that it will be difficult for a young child to integrate such contacts with other aspects of their life.

In his seminal work on children in substitute care, Donald Winnicott (1996) recognised that a child's views needed to be understood in the context of loyalty ties. He tells the story of a boy who told his mother that his foster parent was not feeding him properly. Winnicott was able to establish that there was no justification for this, commenting: 'The boy was trying to say something very complicated, too complicated in fact to be said by a child of eight years.' (p 79). This was that the boy 'felt terribly bad about... the enjoyment of the surroundings away from home', as this 'implied a serious criticism of home.' Winnicott's solution was not to pursue the boy's allegation, but to create a link between the two parents.

A Case Example

In order to illustrate another way of working, I am going to give a recent case example from my own work, one of those with which this article began. After this, I will draw out a possible model for practice which takes into account these ideas. This will be recognised as a very typical case with which Cafcass is called

to work.

Esmee, aged eight, is the daughter of Joanne and Brian. Her parents separated when she was four, at which time her father was an alcoholic and allegedly violent. Both parents have new partners, and Brian has stopped drinking. A contact order was made two years ago, but contact has not taken place for well over a year. Brian is applying for the contact to be enforced. Joanne has made a cross application for the original contact order to be discharged.

When I interviewed Joanne, she told me that she did not want Esmee to go 'anywhere near' Brian. She had no memory of him and seeing her father would only destabilise her. Esmee already had acknowledged behavioural problems. Joanne said: 'He has had chances before. I just cannot trust him. What kind of mother would I be if I let him damage her? My job is to listen to her and protect her.' Joanne said that when Esmee had last had contact, she had complained how 'disgusting' the house had been, with 'rubbish everywhere' and that her clothes 'stank of smoke.'

When I met with Brian, he expressed anger that Joanne had 'brainwashed' Esmee. He showed me photographs of Esmee during contact, clearly happy. He also confirmed that he had stopped using alcohol. During our conversation, it emerged that one of the reasons for seeking contact was that he was worried about Esmee's care ('I've heard rumours'), and he could not be sure about the new partner, whom he had never met. I observed that the flat was not 'disgusting', though carrier bags were used as rubbish bags.

Esmee told me that she did not wish to see her father, and that she would jump out of the window if she were forced to. She said he had been 'mean' to Mummy and was a 'halcoholic'; her father's house was 'disgusting', with 'rubbish everywhere'. He had not bothered to send her a birthday card. I noticed that Esmee was using her mother's words. As we talked about her life and her memories, I asked whether her father knew what she was like now. Esmee said that he did not know she could ride a two-wheeled bike, as she had only been able to ride a trike when he last saw her. She wondered whether he still had the trike. She also wondered whether he knew how long her hair had grown. She also spoke about her father's partner, whom she liked. After a while of talking, Esmee concluded: 'I hate him ... but I miss him.' She also wondered what toy she would take if she did see her father. I reflected back to Esmee the whole of what she had told me, and went through this with her mother, with Esmee sitting next to her. I emphasised the strength of her expressed hatred for her father, but also how she missed him. Joanne seemed reassured to hear Esmee's views, but also touched by the examples I gave of Esmee missing her father.

I asked the court to order a series of three contacts, which I would observe.

As the first approached, Joanne reported to me that Esmee was becoming 'clingy' and was not sleeping. School was difficult. Esmee was also not eating and Joanne was getting worried about her low weight. Surely, health was more important than contact?

I spent time with Joanne telling her that I understood how much Esmee meant to her, and how difficult it was to let her go to contact. I appreciated her fears, which were based on a wish to keep Esmee safe. I also spent time with Joanne's mother and new partner, explaining the plan to them. I also met with Esmee's therapist, whose only information about Esmee's father was based on Joanne's account.

I arrived to collect Esmee for contact. First, we spent time thinking about her emotions, counting them on our fingers: 'nervous; excited; worried; I will

miss Mummy.’ The washing machine was churning around; Esmee said that her tummy felt just like the washing machine. We discussed what clothes she had chosen to wear and what toy she was going to take. I gave assurance that I would not bring her back any later than promised.

As soon as Esmee saw her father, she ran to him and hugged him, telling him how much she had missed him. The contact went well, with Esmee enjoying lots of activities. I noticed that Brian did not ask anything about life at her home. When I tried to make the connection, he simply related it to his own family: ‘My stepson has got one like that.’ Esmee said goodbye, declaring that she was looking forward to the next contact. When she returned home, Esmee did not wish to talk about the contact at all, just wanting to go out to play.

Later in the week, Joanne told me that Esmee had been afraid of seeing ghosts and monsters under her bed. She had banged her head on the door repeatedly. She had been spiteful to her younger brother and behaved so badly that she had to go to her grandmother. I explained how this was due to the tension Esmee was feeling, not because of poor parenting during contact, as Joanne believed.

When it came to the next contact, Esmee refused to go. Her father came to the door, Esmee gave him a hug, but then became distressed. Her father agreed for the contact not to continue and left audibly muttering that Esmee had been ‘poisoned’. Joanne was indignant, saying that she had got Esmee ready, but it had been Esmee’s choice not to go. ‘Didn’t Brian respect that?’

I met with both parents prior to the next contact. I asked Brian to decide what he would do if the same thing happened again. Using the concept of loyalty, I explained how Esmee would be experiencing contact. After some thought, Brian said that he would bring a football and just have a five-minute game with her. He would also write a letter to Esmee, explaining how much he loved her and how proud he was of her. In the letter, he would speak positively about Joanne’s new partner and apologise for the times he had let Esmee down in the past.

Prior to the next contact, Esmee asked me for reassurance that the contact need only be for five minutes. They played football outside the house, with the game going on for much longer than the set time, as Esmee did not want it to stop. When the contact ended, Esmee went inside and we read the letter. Joanne commented: ‘At least he’s admitted it.’ Esmee kept the letter in her room, in her box of ‘special things’.

After this, Brian decided that pursuing direct contact risked upsetting Esmee too much and he did not wish to do this. Instead, he decided that he would telephone at a set time every week, to see how she was. He had been reassured that Esmee was being well cared for at home, so felt much more relaxed.

I recommended ‘no order’ for contact, with a preamble stating that there would be weekly telephone contact. Both parents were happy with this. Brian felt that he was much more in touch with Esmee and that the ground was laid for him developing contact in the future. Joanne was positive that he had recognised her position. A situation that was stuck had been shifted.

Thoughts for practice

Arising from this simple example, I would like to suggest ten pointers for practice that take into account the principles I have outlined:

1. Breaks in contact should be avoided. In general, situations of no contact

arise when there has been a significant gap. During this time, fantasies and fears can develop, with a young child quickly losing a sense of who the other parent really is. Other relationships, such as a step-parent, will quickly take over the need that their other parent was meeting.

2. It is vital to let the parent with residence know that you understand just how difficult it will be to let go of the child, even for a short time. Joanne's anxieties were real and could only begin to shift once they were acknowledged. Ideally, others in the system – including the other parent – should be encouraged to appreciate this. It is rarely helpful to view the parent as deliberately obstructive. They are almost always sincere and are responding to things as they see them. If it is cast as a battle, it will simply confirm each parent in their belief about how unreasonable the other is. Even if an order is made, it is at risk of being undermined. And even if the parent tries to comply, the child will read the parent's body language and oblige by refusing to co-operate.

3. Ensure that both parents have up-to-date and accurate information about the other. It is surprising how often one parent will not know about positive developments and significant changes.

4. Seek to understand contact in the context of the child's overall experience. Look for spaces in which the child shows curiosity, or where there are contradictions in the account, such as Esmee's statement that she 'hated her father, but missed him'. It was important not to dismiss Esmee's fears, but to invite her to talk about the whole range of her thoughts.

5. Share the child's comments with both parents, inviting them to be curious about what the child means by statements. For example, in Esmee's case, a statement that 'I do not want to see my Dad' could mean that she did not wish her mother to be on her own, feeling unloved (see Burrett, 1999). What might she do to reassure her? Joanne was able to reassure Esmee that during contact she would be going to Nanny's for lunch.

6. Ensure that the parent seeking contact can understand the child's sense of loyalty and what contact will feel like for the child. It was worth spending time with Brian to help him understand Esmee's experience. I invited him to think about how hard it would be for Esmee to make a positive statement about her mother in front of him. I reframed 'poison' as 'influence', explaining that all young children are influenced by the parent to whom they are attached.

7. Identify one small step that will dislodge the situation. This must feel safe. An exchange of photos or letters, or a very brief contact, might be examples.

8. Identify and involve key people in the child's family and explain the situation to them, in person if possible. This might be a grandparent, a new partner, or a close friend.

9. If at all possible, identify someone who knows about the whole of the child's life and to whom the child can talk about both family worlds in a relaxed, non-charged way. Sometimes, a social worker can fulfil this function for a while, but it is best if it can be a family member or friend, or a teacher (Pitcher, 2010). In the absence of a person, the child can be encouraged to take a soft toy between homes. If the child does not have a person who understands the whole of their experience in both homes, there is a risk that they can feel very isolated and disconnected. The child may seek to resolve this by refusing contact, or by creating difficulties between parents. If contact is going to succeed, the child needs a sense of continuity and connectedness between the homes. Initially, this can be modelled by a person supervising the contact. For example, if cakes are made, one can be taken to the other home; step-siblings should be talked about, with drawings and cards being made to take home.

10. The court process should be used to enhance the psychological process. In this case, it was helpful to use the court to provide both parents with reassurance that the three contacts were not final. The eventual legal outcome was seen positively by both Brian and Joanne, as both gained from it. It is important to avoid orders that depend on the child's willingness to see the parent, but the use of authority for coercion risks putting the child in a more difficult position, from the point of view of their whole life.

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed what may be going on in those cases in which there are no serious safeguarding issues, but a young child is stating that he or she does not want to see their non-resident parent. These are a minority of cases overall, but take up a lot of court and professional time. The striking thing about all of these cases is that the situation looks completely different to each parent. They do not see what the other sees. These parents will both see themselves as fighting for the child, often based on what the child has stated to them. I believe that placing too great an emphasis on the literal and simply stated 'wishes and feelings' of the child is unfair on the child and also misleading. The child's overall experience, including loyalty ties, needs to be represented to the court. The child is neither the oracle, nor a passive receptor, of parental pressure, but is an active agent.

The best solution is one in which both parents or carers feel heard, and are enabled to think more realistically about each other, and where rigid beliefs soften and lose some of their charge. Such a solution, rather than one that is imposed, contains within it the potential for future development, with all the benefits that this will bring. And it is the family court adviser or children's guardian who is uniquely placed to support this.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank Peta Mees, Child Psychotherapist, for her help in

thinking about these issues. The ideas expressed in this article are his own, and do not necessarily represent those of Cafcass.
The names and identifying details in all the case studies have been changed.
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