How primary school children cope with family change

There is now an increasing chance that children will experience their parents' divorce and, in consequence, important changes to their family life. Official statistics show that more than 70 per cent of these children are under 10 yet most studies have focused on children over this age. This study seeks to remedy this by interviewing children in four primary schools with very different catchment areas about their feelings about family change. The aim was to discover how these changes affected children's lives and what sort of support they feel they need. The study found:

- **Parental divorce or separation is not the only source of insecurity and unhappiness for young children and the quality of the relationships that children have with important adults (and siblings) in their lives can be more important than biological kinship alone.**

- **The most important thing for children was the extent to which both parents remained emotionally and practically committed to them after divorce or separation.**

- **Young children dealt with their emotional difficulties in a number of ways. These ranged from methods of distracting themselves (playing), to escaping (sleeping) through to displaying anger and distress. The children interviewed knew that these were 'coping strategies' and in some instances they used methods that they had learnt in school to deal with emotions.**

- **For children who needed support, the crucial element in their choice of who to turn to was trust. It could take time for trust to be established.**

- **Many children were reluctant to talk to school friends or teachers because they did not think that the school was a safe place. Sometimes they experienced taunts and playground bullying if other children heard about their problems.**

- **Teachers were most useful to children if they displayed kindness and offered comfort in a general way, rather than necessarily talking about private, family matters.**

- **'Doing' may be more important for some children than 'talking', for example, playing games or learning practical skills in a general way rather than being required to talk to strangers.**

Introduction

This is a small-scale qualitative study of young children's experiences of family change (generated mostly through divorce or separation) carried out in years 2 and 5 in four primary schools in the north of England. The aim of the study was to understand, from the perspective of young children, how they coped with major changes in their family's lives and to what or whom they turn at such times.

From the perspective of children

Focus groups and individual interviews revealed that an overly single-minded concentration on divorce as a major trauma in the lives of children was something of an 'adult' perspective. For some children, especially those from more privileged backgrounds, divorce might trigger major changes and create uncertainty in what appeared to be a stable life. The children in these families were more likely to establish good contact arrangements with non-residential parents and to feel fairly content once stability had been re-established.

> **Richard (aged 9): It took me a year and a half to get over it. 'Cos I missed my dad.**
> **Q: How do you think things have worked out for you? If you gave it a mark out of ten, what would you give it now?**
> **Richard: Seven.**

But for children from different sorts of families divorce was not necessarily the only, or the major, fissure in an otherwise uneventful landscape of family life. For some children whose parents had never or only briefly lived together, or whose lives were full of violence entailing police and/or social services involvement, divorce could come fairly low down on their list of concerns. Some were relieved when a violent father left the home and their concern would focus more on the qualities of a new stepfather, or whether their mother would start to have more time for them.

> **I've always wanted [just] my mum 'cos my dad, he never did anything for me. ... Well, me dad never liked my mum in the first place. ... He used to get in the bedroom, lock me out of the bedroom and never care and just hit my mum. No matter how much I was screaming. ... I [don't] ever want to see him again and never because of what he's done to my mum and me. (Chrissie, aged 6)**

In yet other sorts of families the children's lives prior to parental separation bore little resemblance to the model based on marriage and household cohabitation. In these families parents might be 'living apart together', or might regularly separate and reunite, or fathers might go away to work or live with relatives for large portions of time. From the child's perspective it could be equally disturbing and worrying for a father to go back to his family of origin in another country for a long period, or for the child to be separated from one parent while being educated in the UK, as it might be for parents to separate. In the inner city school sampled defining separation and family change as divorce alone would not have been meaningful. The experiences of Makeda and Yasmin reveal the issues that children can face even if there is no parental separation.

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

In Yasmin's case her father returned to Pakistan for a year and her younger brother started to behave differently.

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

What matters to children

Regardless of the children's social class background or the structure of their family, the most important thing to them was the quality of their relationship with significant adults in their lives. For some divorce or separation did not change this, either because the non-residential parent's commitment did not wane, or because the quality of the relationship was so bad that it was not diminished by absence. This does not mean that children are not badly affected by a lack of

love and commitment from one or both of their parents, it is just that for some this lack of commitment pre-dates separation. The children who were most clearly affected by divorce were those who saw the separation (or sometimes one parent's new relationship) as a prelude to the loss of something they valued and needed.

> **JJ (aged 10): It's going to start to go worser than it is now, even though I don't like it and I'm nearly in tears. Because there's a new baby coming and think of it - pram, baby chair, 'Why is it crying?'. It's going to be much harder now ... it feels a lot more [sigh] how do I say it? Er, lot more percent that I won't see him a lot. ...**
>
> **Every time I go to bed I think this is all a dream. ... One day I'll wake up and say 'Hi Mum', and Dad will be there and I'll say 'Dad, what are you doing here?'. I know it's not true. I think to myself, 'What are you talking about JJ?' but I wish ... and just think in my mind, 'I hope it's true'.**

It was not enough for JJ that he saw his father regularly, he needed a greater commitment from him. For other children the problem of experiencing a diminution of parental commitment might take the form of unreliable contact, a lack of birthday presents, a lack of interest in school work. Perceptions of such diminution were highly individual and some children had higher expectations than others, but it was clear that those children for whom divorce meant the loss of a valued relationship found it hard to deal with the emotional toll.

Children's ways of coping

The children interviewed recognised that they were powerless to alter their parents' behaviour and their decisions. They were far too young to be directly influential. They could, however, generate ways in which they could deal with what was happening in their families and this entailed methods of alleviating the hurt or distracting themselves and altering their own mood states.

> **Elise (aged 10): There's nothing children can do [if parents split up]. It's because it's their parents. There's no point getting involved because it might make it worse.**
> **Q: So what's the best thing to do?**
> **Elise: Try and forget what's happened and get on with normal life.**

The researchers identified two main strategies: diversion and emotional expression. In the former children would turn to games, toys or pets as ways of forgetting and to cheer themselves up. In some instances children would deliberately go to bed in order to sleep so that they could wake up feeling better. In the latter they would cry to express their distress or in some cases would become angry and even break things. A number of the children had received helpful advice from parents or practitioners on anger management and reported that they would hit cushions or write things on paper and then screw it all up and throw it away – throwing their bad feelings away with the paper.

Turning to others

The most important ingredient in turning to others for help or comfort was the issue of trust. A trusted parent, grandparent and even neighbour could be an important source of help. However, the help was not necessarily in the form of 'talking' about things. Again for these children distraction could be more significant. Thus being taken out, given sweets and/or a cuddle, being allowed to watch a special video or TV programme could be what the children most wanted and could be the things that were most effective.

Talking could be dangerous for children because school friends might tell other children and it could lead to embarrassment or even taunting. Talking to teachers could be hard, not least because of the lack of privacy in primary schools, but also because it was feared that teachers might talk to parents. Schools, however, could provide a very important resource to children because the school day acts as a diversion from their family worries - being at school allowed some children to forget.

The children could derive benefit from activities like 'circle time', however. In these sessions, children are encouraged to solve problems and to share solutions to everyday problems. The problems are hypothetical but reality based and so allow children to hear about and to propose ways of dealing with common problems such as sadness, anger, disappointment and so on. 'Circle time' is non-stigmatising because children do not talk about their own families or their own difficulties.

Few of the children identified other professionals as significant sources of help. Those who had social workers or counsellors they liked and trusted would mention them, but they had little to say about professionals with whom they might have had brief contact (such as court welfare officers or child

psychiatrists). For children these meetings had little significance precisely because the people they met were strangers with whom they had no chance to develop trust.

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

Yet even children who developed good relationships with their counsellors could be resentful of being required to talk about difficult things when they wanted to feel happy or to think about other things. The children who felt forced to go to a counsellor could become very resistant.

Ocky (aged 6): I don't think they can [make things better]. They say they can but I don't think they can. I think that's a load of crap but I'm not allowed to say that. ... Well, it didn't work for me.

Conclusions

This study raises a number of questions about how young children deal with family change and what kind of support they feel they need. One important finding is that children do not necessarily want more opportunities to talk – at least not if the service is provided by strangers with whom they can have no relationship of trust. It also suggests that support that does not target divorce per se might be more useful than specialist programmes for the children of divorced or separated parents (which possibly stigmatise those children in the eyes of their peers). This is because this project suggests that this is not how many children perceive themselves even though they may be coping with problems arising from their parents' changing relationships or separations. It may also be that the status of therapeutic 'talking' as a means to resolve problems needs to give way to a re-evaluation of 'doing', action and distraction. This does not mean that children should not be allowed a voice and the possibility of participating in decision-making, but it might mean that giving children a voice should not be interpreted as meaning only therapeutic talk.

About the project

The research was undertaken by Amanda Wade and Carol Smart at the Centre for Research on Family, Kinship & Childhood at the University of Leeds.

The children were aged 5/6 years and 8/9 years and came from a wide range of socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. In the first stage the researchers worked with small focus groups of children (106 boys and 128 girls in total) to explore their strategies for dealing with change in a hypothetical way. They then interviewed selected children (20 boys and 27 girls) on an individual basis.

How to get further information

For more information about the study contact a.e.wade@leeds.ac.uk or visit the website on www.leeds.ac.uk/family.

The full report, **Facing family change: Children's circumstances, strategies and resources** by Amanda Wade and Carol Smart, is published for the Foundation by YPS as part of the Family Change series (ISBN 1 84263 077 6, price £12.95).

JR JOSEPH ROWNTREE FOUNDATION

Published by the
Joseph Rowntree Foundation
The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP
Tel: 01904 629241 Fax: 01904 620072
http://www.jrf.org.uk

ISSN 0958-3084