

# "LOVE YOUR CHILDREN MORE THAN YOU HATE EACH OTHER."

The impact of divorce and separation on families:  
views of Parentline Plus service users



## **The impact of divorce and separation on families: views of Parentline Plus service users**

**"Love your children more than you hate each other."  
Female survey respondent**

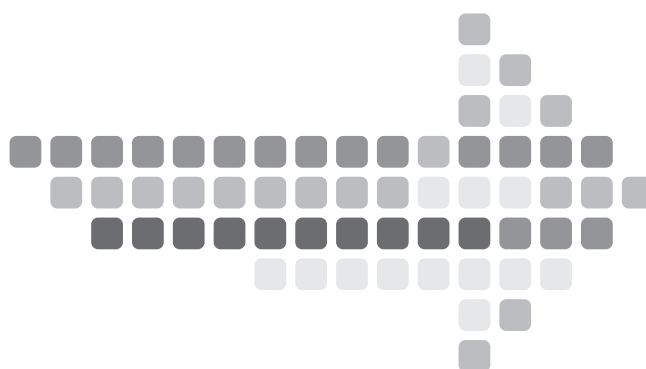
**"What I have found and have come to realise is that it wasn't so much the break up that caused the children so much stress and upset but my attitude and sadness. I was unable to be the happy go lucky Mummy they knew, instead I was sad snappy cried angry all very negative emotions."  
Female survey respondent**

**"It will get better in time. You have to learn to enjoy the family you have become and you can do that once you have grieved for the family you were or wanted to be."  
Female survey respondent**

**"Head for the light, you will reach it eventually. It would be helpful to have more advice for dealing with life after a divorce and how to pick up the pieces particularly where children are involved."  
Female survey respondent**

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# 1. Key Findings

Divorce and separation cause huge emotional turmoil for all involved.

Parents feel isolated, ashamed, stigmatised and alone at this time and don't know who to turn to.

The experience and feelings of mothers and fathers is very different, and there are differences in how they want to remain involved.

Many lone mothers ring Parentline because their children have insufficient contact with their father. But many fathers ring because they feel that mothers deny contact to them or poison their children against them.

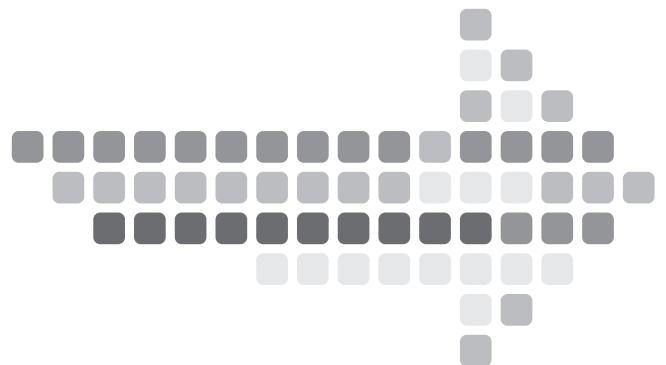
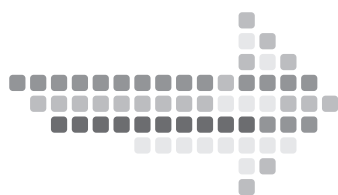
Conflicts present in the relationship are all too often played out after the split, making it almost impossible to reach voluntary agreements and risking using the children as weapons in an ongoing battle between both parents. Money and contact are usually the battleground for ongoing conflict.

Conflicts about money are frequent with mothers often saying that they settle for less than they are entitled to, and fathers feeling resentful and that there is not enough money to go round.

Children are badly affected but parents appear less likely to notice this when they are focused on the separation because of the traumatic impact on them.

Lone parents face extremely difficult parenting challenges as well as financial and work life balance challenges.

Mothers and fathers contact services differently and at different times, but face very similar challenges from their children.



## 2. Introduction

Since its inception in 1999, Parentline Plus has retained a specialism in supporting families who have experienced divorce, separation and re-partnering, because of the particular expertise of one of our founder charities, The National Stepfamily Association.

The changing policy context around Child Support, and increased political interest in the family, prompted us to investigate data from our service users to explore their experience of divorce and separation.

We undertook an analysis of 20,000 calls to Parentline, our free\*, 24/7, 365-day helpline, received during October 2007 – March 2008. We posted a survey on our website for a month in March/April 2008 and received 179 responses – 154 from women and 25 from men. And we undertook focus groups in February 2008 to get more qualitative information from parents.

Four focus groups were undertaken in South London and Nottingham. All parents were drawn from low income and class groups. Two groups were of parents now separated or divorced and living with a new partner.

- One group of mothers of children 5-11
- One group of fathers of children 12-16
- 1-2 in each group had another child with their new partner

The other two groups were of parents now separated or divorced but not living with a new partner.

- One group of mothers of children 12-16
- One group of fathers of children 5-11

Divorce and separation are not one-off events in people's lives. Both are processes, which are often very painful and badly managed (Hetherington and Kelly 2002). If seen as a life process, this allows services to offer support during single parenthood, remarriage and stepfamily life. Parents need support throughout these experiences, and need different types and

levels of support at different stages.

It is predicted that, on current trends, over two in every five marriages will end in divorce (Rodgers and Prior 1998). Children experiencing divorce and separation are likely to experience further family change as their parents re-partner and form a stepfamily. One in ten men and nearly one in four women forming a civil partnership in the UK in 2006 had been in a previous legal partnership, in nearly all cases a marriage (Office of National Statistics 2007); and the average duration of marriages is 11.6 years (Office of National Statistics 2007a).

Children experiencing divorce and separation are likely to experience further family change as their parents re-partner and form a stepfamily. Most stepfamilies are stepfather families, with 80% of stepchildren under 18 living with their mother and stepfather (Office of National Statistics 2005); 27% of families with children are headed by a lone parent (Office of National Statistics 2004) and a quarter of all UK children live with a lone parent (Dunneil 2007).

Research has shown that children from separated families have a one and a half times to double the risk of poor outcomes compared to children from intact families and this risk increases if they experience multiple family changes (Pryor and Rodgers 2001). The key variables affecting outcomes for children are low family income, ongoing parental conflict particularly when it directly involves the children, conflict in stepfamilies, reduction in quality of parenting and the quality of parent-child relationships, the level of community resources, lack of access to support, especially from grandparents and extended family members and friends, and individual child-based difficulties in managing stress and transitions (Hawthorne, Jessop, Pryor and Richards 2003). In the analysis of Parentline Plus service users' experiences, all these factors showed up. This illustrates the urgent need to reach out to families experiencing separation, divorce and re-partnering in order to offer flexible support to mitigate the impact on children.

# 3. What parents have told us

Splitting up is a difficult decision and people do not do it lightly. Divorce or separation is a process that takes time, and causes emotional turmoil to all involved. Many of the parents who responded to our survey wished that they had not needed to split up at all.

Parents in the focus groups described how they could not think or act clearly at this time; they felt that their lives had been turned upside down and their confidence was severely knocked. Mothers and fathers felt very alone and did not know who to turn to. Mothers and fathers had no clear sense of what they needed to do, and in what order, and no obvious place to go for advice and support. Most mothers and fathers went to family or friends for advice and support, especially friends who had been through the experience themselves. Many felt some sort of failure and stigma, and that they had let their children down. More positively, many parents also felt that after time, the split had made them stronger.

Research suggests that in most cases one partner, generally the woman, makes the decision to end the relationship, but that reaching this decision will have taken a long time. When the other partner is told of the decision they are usually shocked and very distressed (Myers 1986 and Myers 1989), not least because they are often two years behind in their understanding of and thinking about the state of their relationship (Clarke-Stewart and Brentano 2006). Inevitably, this causes huge difficulties for everyone involved.

Our data shows that men and women experience divorce and separation differently, but that both parents experience difficulties with their children in similar ways, although lone mothers are more likely to contact us, and to talk about aggression and violence from their children.

The data also shows that when parents ring about divorce and separation they are less likely than all our callers to talk about behavioural challenges. When they ring as lone parents they are far more likely to be concerned about these challenges.

It was really clear from our data that parents did not want or mean to cause harm to their children, but that their own emotional state interfered with their ability to do their best for the children. And sometimes, in situations of domestic violence, safety had to be the paramount concern.

**“Just try to work at your relationship, two parents together is better than two separate ones. However do not accept any abuse from your partner. The children will adapt to the new situation and things will settle down.”**  
Female survey respondent

**“I think the Divorce should be the VERY LAST resort that you should be doing but if you really have to I say it YOU ARE DIVORCING THE PARTNER NOT YOUR KIDS. Don’t forget that you will ALWAYS BE A PARENT no matter what.”**  
Male survey respondent

## 3.1 Mothers and fathers

The reasons for calling and concerns expressed were different for men and women, suggesting that the experience of family life remains gendered. This was borne out by survey responses and focus group discussions.

During the period October 2007 – March 2008, 1,955 parents rang Parentline to seek support about the impact of divorce and separation on themselves, representing 9% of all long calls (Many parents ring Parentline for a short call – seeking information for example; anonymous case records are kept of all calls lasting over 12 minutes and these are the ones used for this report. Such calls are termed ‘long calls’ in this report). Of these 29% were men; this compares to 16% of men calling for a longer conversation about any issue during the same time period, and indicates that men are more likely to call about divorce and separation issues.

Table 1 shows some interesting differences in their concerns. Women were much more likely than men to call with concerns about inability to reach agreement, about access issues, about finance, residence and parental responsibility and stepfamily tensions.

**Table 1: Key issues for men and women calling about divorce and separation (n = 1,955)**

Issues	Percentage of men raising issue	Percentage of women raising issue
Stepfamily tension	3%	8%
Unable to reach agreement	12%	28%
Wanting more contact with children	14%	14%
Finance	3%	9%
Housing	2%	5%
Parental Responsibility	8%	13%
Residence	6%	11%
Access	11%	19%
Other	4%	12%

During the same time period 2,222 calls (11% of long calls received) gave the primary reason for calling as the impact of divorce and separation on children and young people.

### 3.2 The impact of divorce and separation on children

**Table 2: Calls concerning the impact of divorce and separation on children (n = 2,222)**

Issues	Percentage
Lack of contact	21%
Unreliable contact	22%
Child unwilling to have contact with parent	13%
Impact on their behaviour	32%
New partner stepfamily conflict	15%
Living arrangements	23%
Other	19%

In the focus groups, the perspectives of mothers and fathers were completely different, and both felt equally hard done by. For mothers, in addition to having to take on both parental roles, their central concern was financial security, and the preservation of their 'old' lifestyle. The fathers in the focus groups considered themselves to be responsible parents, and all but one were supporting their ex-partner financially. But all these men felt that the odds were stacked against them. All had moved out of their former home and left the children behind. They faced building a new life and like mothers, felt that they had everything to do at a time when they could hardly think straight.

Some fathers were devastated to leave their children and relinquish day to day involvement in their lives. A few said that they had to go through a mourning process before they could get their lives back together. And because fathers were removed from family life, they tended to imagine the worst. They were convinced that their children were being ‘brainwashed’ against them and that the influence from a very early age would put their children beyond reach. Fathers with older children had to compete with other attractions in their teenagers’ lives. And some fathers were concerned about the impact of changing parental controls on their children’s behaviour – for example decline in progress at school, and an increase in bad behaviour. This increased fathers’ frustration at their lack of influence while at the same time reinforcing the need for and importance of their role.

### 3.3 Parents in turmoil

**“So difficult for their Dad to put kids first – before his own hurt feeling.”**

**Female survey respondent**

**“The first two years I spent crying most of the time. It takes a long time to heal and you cannot help but involve the children in the upset.”**

**Female survey respondent**

Parents and carers who called at the time of the divorce or separation were far less likely than callers generally to be concerned about their children’s behaviour than those who called after the event when new households had been established. This is likely to be because of their own emotional state. This could mean that they do not notice issues for their children, and/or that their children hide their emotions and needs from their parents. Certainly research suggests that children do put their parents’ needs above their own when their parents are troubled (NSPCC 2006, Wade and Smart 2002).

Research shows that it’s how people separate that makes the difference to children, and not simply that they separate (Pryor and Rodgers 2001). It is the ongoing conflict that is damaging to children, especially when they are directly involved in it. The difficulty for most parents is that the conflicts that led to the separation do not end at the point of separation.

**“People seem to be hell bent on getting even and settling scores. I think it is your partner you are separating from and not the children and they should never feel this is the case.”**

**Female survey respondent**

**“Most problems arise from people’s emotions. Take all the help and support offered from family and friends. Don’t be too ashamed also to take advice from helplines.”**

**Female survey respondent**

The Table below compares call volumes received overall to Parentline about behavioural issues with those calls focused on divorce and separation.

**Table 3: Calls concerning behaviour matched against calls concerning divorce and separation**

<b>Location</b>	<b>Calls about behaviour as the main reason for calling</b>	<b>Calls about divorce and separation which also referred to behavioural concerns</b>
At home	25%	12%
At school	6%	3%
Other location	3%	1%



Parents in the focus groups described how they were faced with having to do everything again. Fathers had to find a new home and build a new life. Mothers had to take on both parental roles and new things for the first time. All felt very alone and did not know where to turn. There is an urgent need to reach out to these parents with services and support. Parents' sense of shame and stigma, their isolation and their emotional turmoil all combine to make it almost impossible for them to find or use appropriate services unless these services reach out and go to them. And it is clear that services must differentiate between mothers and fathers in order to reach them, and to work effectively with them at this turbulent time in their lives.

Research evidence suggests that the negative impact for children is often short-term, with the most marked effect during the first two years following a divorce (Dowling and Barnes 2000). This relates very strongly to the difficulties their parents experience and hence the distraction of parents from parenting during this time.

### **3.4 Reaching agreement/ working together**

Disturbingly, parents who completed our survey and those taking part in focus groups were on the whole very pessimistic about their ability to sort anything out with ease, and in particular they doubted their ability to sort money out voluntarily. They pointed out that if they could have negotiated anything they would probably still be together. This is especially worrying in the light of policy decisions to expect parents to reach voluntary agreements about child maintenance if at all possible.

As shown in Table 1, women were even more likely to say that they were unable to reach agreement with the other parent, far more likely to say that they wanted their children to have more contact with their father and far more worried about finances. This reflects research findings showing increased risk of poverty for lone mothers (Jarvis and Jenkins 1998). It also suggests that the experiences of fathers who feel blocked in having contact with their children may not be typical of the majority (Lewis 2000, Wallerstein and Kelly 1980, Turkat 2002).

**"Communication can be tough. If this was an issue in marriage, divorce will not resolve it."  
Female survey respondent**

**"It is very hard to work together at the beginning if you have a lot of anger towards each other and feelings of hatred."  
Female survey respondent**

**"Hope for the best but prepare for the worst – because that's what often happens."  
Female survey respondent**

**"Don't let an ex bully you, stay in control, even when everything seems to be falling apart."  
Female survey respondent**

**"We reached agreement but it isn't working very well on my part as I don't feel I get enough maintenance and he only sees my daughter once a week and I get verbal abuse when he brings her home the following morning."  
Female survey respondent**

And even when agreements are made, as new adult relationships are formed, problems often arise again:

**"We did come to an agreement initially – maintaining the agreement has been impossible."  
Female survey respondent**

**"My ex is in a new relationship and does not see his children as often as before."  
Female survey respondent**

And sometimes, in time, things really do improve:

**"My first husband suffered from anger problems and it was difficult to deal with at first, but after some help and assistance he is now a fantastic dad to his 2 children, and they are enjoying a good relationship with him, and I have managed to become friends with him."  
Female survey respondent**

But there seem to be sharp differences of attitude and experience:

**“My experience is that men get a very poor deal in divorce, and there is no easy way to get contact with your children when dealing with an unreasonable ex-partner.”**

**Male survey respondent**

**“Co-parenting did not exist in our case but I would strongly advise the courts to force the absent parent to take more active part in the children’s lives.”**

**Female survey respondent**

**“My daughter is happy because her mother has devoted all her time to her and her welfare since the separation, however this has marginalised me totally.”**

**Male survey respondent**

As these quotes illustrate, it is dangerous to make any assumptions about how mothers, fathers and children will experience co-parenting immediately after separation and in the years that follow. Services therefore must be flexible and responsive, starting with the feelings, experiences and needs of the individual and their family rather than trying to slot people into predetermined ways of behaving or ways of receiving services.

### **3.5 Contact**

Given the findings above, it is not surprising that contact issues were often complicated and a source of further disagreement and tension. Moreover, contact and money were seen as intertwined, despite all the efforts of government and various helping agencies to try to separate these issues for parents. This is likely to be because money and contact represent ongoing conflict – as can be seen from our research; they are not experienced as separate or straightforward. And they are battlegrounds for parents and so for children.

**“No, he never sees or pays for his daughter.”**  
**Female survey respondent**

**“I am a single parent since Nov 2004. My wife and my boys runaway but some reason court will not understand because I am DAD. I am still having problems about financial matters. I am still having court dates. Soon as**

**I get my money from the sale of the house I can look after my boys.”**

**Male survey respondent**

**“Children seem ok during the week. Eldest daughter regularly speaks of not wanting me to leave her with Daddy, has temper tantrum once a day and blames me for leaving her and her sister with Daddy. Cries for me when I leave her and is hanging on to my legs as I am walking away.”**

**Female survey respondent**

**“Ex left when baby was 5 months. Contact sporadic. By 18 months my son was getting upset when his Daddy failed to turn up for contact – banging front door screaming “Daddy, Daddy, Daddy”. When contact took place it would result in tantrums afterwards.”**

**Female survey respondent**

Although parents in the focus groups claimed not to use their children as a weapon against their ex, there were examples of this happening. Access and contact were limited as a form of ‘punishment’: the children were used to demand extra money; fathers spoiled their children in a way that mothers couldn’t, and there were many instances of both parents trying to score points off one another through their children. And many fathers were convinced that their ex-partner poisoned the children against them, while the mothers claim that they did not.

**“You just want him to suffer.”**

**Mother in focus group**

Implicit in all the discussions at the focus groups was a sense of a battle, largely fought over the children and money.

**“I’ve got my son, I’m the one who’s won.”**

**Mother in focus group**

### 3.6 Money

The responses to this section of our web survey were very strong and the overwhelming response was that it was impossible to resolve money issues. Similarly, the focus groups revealed a very strong sense of the impossibility of resolving financial issues. Moreover, it is clear that money is intimately linked to all the other disagreements that continue post-separation.

Although fathers often said that they did provide financially, mothers felt that this money did not cover any extras such as school trips, and reported that they were often willing to settle for less than they were entitled to in order to keep the peace, protect themselves and protect their children from further acrimony. In the focus groups a very high proportion of mothers received no financial support from the father. And most did not want it – some wanted to be rid of a violent partner; some did not want the rights that went with the money; some did not want to be ‘beholden’. This is worrying. Lone parenthood is strongly associated with an increased risk of poverty (Jarvis and Jenkins 1998). The new Child Support arrangements are predicated on most parents reaching voluntary agreements and many charities have argued that this could risk putting more lone mothers and their children in poverty. Our findings suggest that it will be extremely difficult to achieve high volumes of voluntary agreements without very active support rather than simply information provision. And that women may well settle for less than they need; so capacity must be built to provide support to both parents. This support will need to be practical but will also need to engage in parents’ emotions about finances and contact. At this time parents need help to grieve the loss as well as to sort out what is actually possible, practical, realistic and fair.

In the focus groups, there were clear differences between mothers’ and fathers’ views. Mothers wanted sufficient income to support the lives they and their children were used to leading, but fathers faced with running two households found that there wasn’t enough money to go round. Mothers resented the fact that they could not give their children the life they wanted to, and fathers that they were left with so little to

live on themselves. In addition, mothers wanted fathers to be financially responsible for their children, but recognised that their ex believed that they were paying money to the mother. And this perception caused resentment for fathers.

**“I have always tried to provide for my son.”  
Male survey respondent**

**“Ex-partner pays without problem each month but will not see children or participate in their care.”  
Female survey respondent**

**“He’s just not interested in paying a penny for my son or even having contact.”  
Female survey respondent**

**“I don’t ask it is pointless.”  
Female survey respondent**

**“Since moving in with his new partner my soon to be ex has stopped paying for our 2 children.”  
Female survey respondent**

**“Money was a huge issue. I get less child support than I am entitled to from him but I accept that as it does help and I don’t want to rock the boat.”  
Female survey respondent**

**“Don’t receive money from ex-partner, suffered domestic violence from him so did not apply for maintenance in my divorce proceedings.”  
Female survey respondent**

**“Money is an issue. He uses it as a way of controlling.”  
Female survey respondent**

**“He won’t contribute to school holidays or to any out-of-school activities or towards our child’s top ups for their mobile phone.”  
Female survey respondent**

Few parents in the focus groups had involved the Child Support Agency (CSA), but in the few cases where the agency was involved there were very mixed views, and mothers and

fathers held opposing views. Mothers felt the CSA could be helpful where the father was traceable and compliant but not where the father was hard to locate or lied about his income. Fathers hated the CSA whether they had direct experience of it or not. They felt that it was an organisation there to champion the cause of mothers, whereas they had nowhere to go. Solicitors were not thought to be any better, and if anything fuelled the situation.

### 3.7 Lone parenting

**“I find the most difficult thing to be that as the resident parent I am always the bad guy. I am the one who has to get them up, organise things etc whereas my ex husband comes in takes them out and does fun things all the time.”**

**Female survey respondent**

**“I would never have embarked on planned single parenthood. If I had known I was going to end up as a single parent I would not have planned to have a child.”**

**Female survey respondent**

**“Ask for support and keep asking for it. Being a single parent is the toughest thing ever. Sometimes rewarding but more often totally lonely and awful.”**

**Female survey respondent**

Once new households are established lone parents are faced undertaking both parental roles, and with their children’s feelings about the changes to their family. Often these manifest as challenging behaviour. Research shows that children are often angry and bewildered and that anger is sometimes directed at the parent who is seen to have caused the separation. For younger children, that is the person who has left the house, regardless of who initiated the separation (Burns and Dunlop 1999).

We looked at 5,909 long calls between October 2007 and March 2008 that showed behaviour as the primary reason for calling. 42% of these callers were lone mothers, 3% were lone fathers and 1% were non-resident fathers. Lone parents’ concerns about their children’s behaviour showed some very serious difficulties and it was lone mothers who were most likely to call about these issues. The figures do not add up to 100% because callers may report many issues, all of which are recorded.

**Table 4: Children’s behaviour as it concerned lone mothers, lone fathers and non-resident fathers compared to all long calls about behaviour to Parentline.**

<b>Location</b>	<b>Calls about behaviour as the main reason for calling</b>	<b>Calls about behaviour as the main reason for calling made by lone mothers</b>	<b>Calls about behaviour as the main reason for calling made by lone fathers</b>	<b>Calls about behaviour as the main reason for calling made by non-resident fathers</b>
At home	25%	37%	2%	<1%
At school	6%	10%	1%	<1%
Other location	3%	4%	<1%	<1%

However, many of these concerns were not gendered. This is important to understand – men and women may choose to access different services at different times and about different things, but as parents their concerns for their children are strikingly similar. Table 5 below compares all calls about behaviour with calls concerning behaviour from lone mothers, lone fathers and non-resident fathers during October 2007 – March 2008.

Table 5 shows that 87% of all long calls were about behaviour at home. Comparing these calls by analysing calls from lone mothers, lone fathers and non-resident fathers shows that 88% of calls from lone mothers referred to behaviour at home, 82% of calls from lone fathers referred to behaviour at home and 78% of calls from non-resident fathers referred to behaviour at home, and so on down the table. Table 5 differs from Table 4 in that this table records all mentions of behavioural concerns, whether or not they are the main reasons for calling Parentline. It is important to reiterate that many callers report a multitude of concerns and therefore the columns do not add up to 100% because all concerns are recorded.

**Table 5: Children’s behaviour as experienced by lone mothers, lone fathers and non-resident fathers**

	<b>Calls about behaviour from all callers</b>	<b>Lone mother</b>	<b>Lone father</b>	<b>Non-resident father</b>
At home	87%	88%	82%	78%
At school	22%	23%	19%	14%
Other location	11%	10%	16%	25%
<b>Verbal aggression</b>				
Verbal aggression	61%	65%	53%	33%
<b>Physical aggression</b>				
Physical aggression	30%	34%	21%	19%
<b>Other</b>				
Other	18%	17%	15%	11%
Lying	16%	15%	12%	11%
Bad crowd	15%	15%	16%	14%
Staying away from home	14%	13%	13%	14%
Stealing	13%	12%	8%	11%
Alcohol	10%	9%	15%	19%
Drugs	9%	8%	10%	17%
Peer pressure	8%	7%	9%	8%
Wanting to leave home	8%	7%	6%	6%
Smoking	7%	7%	7%	14%
Runaway\threatening	5%	4%	4%	8%
Involved with youth justice system	4%	5%	4%	6%
Internet misuse	2%	2%	2%	3%

### 3.8 Impact on children

**“My daughter is still affected she is still mournful of our break up and sad inside she gets on with things but has a sadness about her that just won’t go away.”**

**Female survey respondent**

Some parents felt that the impact of separation on their children was positive – but generally these were parents who had left violent and abusive relationships.

**"During my marriage we moved around often. We are now settled into an area. The children feel more stable as they have access to extended family members."**

**Female survey respondent**

**"They are happy with me being happy."**

**Female survey respondent**

**"My son who was 6 at the time cheered at the prospect of escaping a 'short fused' dad. He changed from being a tense, troublesome boy into a very mellow one."**

**Female survey respondent**

Research suggests that the presence of conflict before and during divorce and separation can mean that there is an immediate sense of relief when one parent leaves the house (Pritchard 1998).

Most parents in the focus groups and responding to our survey talked about the impact on children being devastating, at least in the early stages after the separation. And research confirms that children feel the loss of day-to-day contact with their father as the worst aspect of separation (Smith et al 1997).

**"She keeps asking 4 Daddy."**

**Female survey respondent**

**"Very sad and suicidal."**

**Female survey respondent**

**"They became very insecure, worried and panicky and didn't know whose side to take, which was totally unfair on them. They felt pulled between 2 arguing parents, it's so unfair to put a child through it."**

**Female survey respondent**

**"My son went through a very, very angry phase, even putting our lives in danger."**

**Female survey respondent**

**"I think splitting up has been the biggest single contributory factor to any problems they have dealing with life and becoming useful members of society."**

**Male survey respondent**

**"They have been very angry, fighting with each other and fighting with me."**

**Female survey respondent**

And parents' concerns for their children could also fuel ongoing conflict between the parents:

**"Agreement made for contact. Very different views on how to deal with emotional issues."**

**Female survey respondent**

**"It's the belief that each one of us separately are to blame for our daughter's anti-social behaviour that is the problem."**

**Female survey respondent**

NSPCC/ChildLine describe how children calling ChildLine can be forced into making impossible choices about for example which parent to live with, and point out that many children say that the choices they make for themselves are tightly constrained by the needs of their parents. Sometimes parents try not to give any information to children, in an attempt to protect them, but children calling ChildLine report that this only increases their anxiety (NSPCC 2006).

Children's mental health was indicated 1,139 times as the primary reason for calls to Parentline which represented 5% of long calls. Of those calls, lone mothers represented 38%, lone fathers 3% and non-resident fathers 1%. Here we see some striking differences in the concerns of lone mothers and lone fathers. In particular fathers were more concerned about depressed feelings not identified by health professionals (Farmer 2002). It is hard to know if this is because their children suffered more because they did not live with their mother, or because fathers find it much harder to access services for themselves or their children (Katz, La Placa and Hunter 2007, Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2000, 2003).

Table 6 compares all calls about mental health with calls from lone mothers, lone fathers and non-resident fathers about mental health. Again, figures do not add up to 100% due to the complexity and multiplicity of issues reported by parents.

**Table 6: Calls about children’s mental health**

<b>Issues</b>	<b>All calls about children’s mental health</b>	<b>Lone mother</b>	<b>Lone father</b>	<b>Non-resident father</b>
Self-harm	22%	16%	31%	33%
Depressed feelings (not identified by health professional)	29%	26%	40%	50%
Depressed feeling (Identified by health professional)	18%	21%	9%	17%
ADHD/ADD/ Hyperactivity (identified by a professional)	9%	11%	9%	0%
Eating disorder	8%	6%	3%	8%
ADHD/ADD/ Hyperactivity (not identified by a professional)	7%	10%	6%	0%
OCD	4%	5%	0%	0%
Panic attacks	4%	4%	3%	0%

A few children of parents in the focus group had received specialist support, and a few of the web survey respondents also talked about services their children had received, but overwhelmingly parents were left to struggle with their children’s distress and few services were offered directly to children. Yet ChildLine reports that 13% of all their calls concern problematic family relationships, including divorce and separation – the second highest reason for calling ChildLine (ChildLine 2005/2006).

Research suggests that we know a lot about the types of services that might be useful to children. These include enabling parents to communicate with their children, helping children to understand, facilitating support networks for children – including from extended family members, especially grandparents – maintaining school and community links, conflict reduction for parents and conflict management for children, facilitating contact with non-resident parents and parenting support (Hawthorne et al 2003, Wade and Smart 2002).

The quality of parenting is known to reduce during the process of divorce and separation, and on the evidence of our service-users, parents know this too. But research is also clear that the quality of parenting, and in particular the parent-child relationship, is critical to good outcomes for children (Deater-Deckard and Dunn 1999). What is less clear is the causality. Research has found mothers in stepfamilies with much higher rates of mental ill-health than in other families (Smith, M., et al 2002). Longitudinal research has found that mothers in families that subsequently divorce tend to already display higher levels of negativity and lower levels of control towards their children than those in low-conflict non-divorcing families. And fathers in these families also showed less control than fathers in low conflict families (Hetherington et al 1999).

This suggests that it is really important to reach parents in high conflict families rather than wait until they do or do not separate. It is as important to reach families during the process of separation.

Yet, in all the work to produce local parenting strategies, Parentline Plus has yet to see a strategy that identifies high-conflict families as a group who need to be reached. Nor have we seen a strategy that seeks to reach families who are splitting up, or repartnering. But if we want to mitigate against the damage that this might cause children, this seems an obvious target.

Research indicates that the negative impact on children of divorce, separation and repartnering can be mitigated when there is close involvement with the children of a trusted adult – a family friend, relative, worker or mentor for example (Clarke-Stewart 2006, Hetherington and Kelly 2002, Lengua, Wolchik and Braver 1995). Strategies that look to providing support for children who are struggling, or disaffected, or in trouble, need to appreciate that family change may lie at the heart of some of their difficulties, and seek to engage with a wider network of support for children than their parents during the process of family change.

### **3.9 Setting up a new stepfamily**

Stepfamily formation involves the rearrangement of households and is usually very complicated, since it involves establishing several new relationships as well as changing existing relationships. For children, these new relationships are not with people they have chosen, and include stepparents, stepgrandparents and stepsiblings and often half siblings also.

**“Eldest has changed her name from her father’s, two younger boys have become more disruptive at school especially since their father bought a house with the new partner and her children.”**

**Female survey respondent**

**“She’s finding it difficult as it’s always been just the two of us and doesn’t like sharing me. She is too young to understand what is happening.”**

**Female survey respondent**

**“They found it hard as they didn’t want to see me hurt again, but I explained to them that, sometimes you have to take a risk... And now they are happy.”**

**Female survey respondent**

**“It was seven years before he moved in and at first it was fine. My 14 year old daughter is now very unhappy and has told me this week that she isn’t coming home unless I leave my husband.”**

**Female survey respondent**

**“The children don’t get on... The youngest 3 fight and argue and the eldest hates all the other children.”**

**Female survey respondent**

**“They love my new partner – he was introduced very slowly... He was never introduced as their new Dad just mummy’s friend.”**

**Female survey respondent**

**“Dated for a while which affected my daughter so badly that I ended the relationship and do not intend to date again for several years, if ever.”**

**Female survey respondent**

**“The children get on very well most of the time, although the sheer numbers (6) mean that certain times can be stressful.”**

**Female survey respondent**

Most parents in the focus groups who were not in a new family were wary of it. For mothers, the big issue was trust – trusting another man and trusting them with their children. And interestingly, research certainly bears out that the quality of the new couple relationship is key to child wellbeing (Smith, M., et al 2002).

For those parents in the focus groups in a stepfamily, they brought their own sets of issues. For some, the attitude of their ex-partner changed for the worse when a new one came on the scene. All agreed that new partners meant more people vying for attention, which could be difficult to give. Men and women found that their issues were mostly about how the new partner related to and was regarded by their children. Research has found that despite the complexities and vulnerabilities of children and adults in stepfamilies, they are far less likely to be in contact with services than other families, even where mothers have a known history of depression, and need to be understood as a ‘hard to reach’ group (Smith, M., et al 2002). This research also found that children who described their stepparent as being involved in the household where much more likely to have a good relationship with them.



### 3.10 Child maintenance services

The focus groups were asked about the proposed new child maintenance information and support service which is to be set up alongside the reformed CSA – to become CMEC (Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission). The new service is to help as many separating parents as possible reach voluntary maintenance agreements.

Responses to the idea of the service were muted, and mothers and fathers had different perspectives. However, all agreed that reaching voluntary agreements was extremely difficult, so questioned the viability of the whole thing. Parents felt that the service would have to offer some sort of mediation, and could not see that a more hands-off support and information service could work. However, a few pointed out that there was currently no organisation or stance taken on voluntary agreements and felt that championing this could be helpful. Parents also felt that the principle of an information or advice service was good because they felt that they had needed information.

However, and importantly, parents' emotional state at the time of separation meant that they wanted more support and guidance than this service may be able to offer. They wanted a roadmap, to be told exactly what steps they needed to take, and they wanted someone to hold their hand through it. They thought some sort of intermediary was a good idea, but expected the support offered to be active, offering practical advice and help.

Some fathers responded favourably to the idea of something that offered impartial advice to them but others believed that the only thing that would really help them was a change in the law, and what they described as equality of treatment in law. Fathers also rejected the way the service was branded, because it was reminiscent of the CSA. They said they would be unlikely to contact a service that was so branded.

**“The CSA = child maintenance. Child maintenance means money – your money.”**  
Father in focus group

Mothers felt that the issue was more that an impartial advice service had no teeth. They felt that they needed a service that would make things happen rather than just offer advice.

It will be important to ensure that the services set up to offer support and information to parents are appropriately marketed and have adequate capacity. On the basis of this and other research, most parents will find it very hard to reach voluntary agreements, and such agreements could disadvantage lone mothers, risking higher levels of poverty for them and their children.

### 3.11 Tips from parents

We asked parents on the web survey what tips they could give to others in their situation. Many said that they could not offer any advice because they needed it themselves. But many offered real insight and wisdom.

**“Put your children first. Always, always put the children first. Leave your point scoring and any power games to another arena. Look at the long term, and ask yourself, are you really putting the children first.”**  
Female survey respondent

**“Never disrespect your ex – think it if you wish but do not.”**  
Female survey respondent

**“Try to make it as amicable as possible, as even though you are no longer together you are still bringing up children together and you still need to be united in the way you deal with the children.”**  
Female survey respondent

**“Give the children constant reassurance that it is nothing to do with them and that mummy and daddy still love them the same but just don't love each other anymore.”**  
Female survey respondent

**“Children can be very demanding at this time, but it is your time they are demanding. Spend time with them. Ignore the housework. Make cakes together, plasticine, draw pictures.”**  
Female survey respondent

**"Get all the support you can get. Go to Relate for counselling with or without your spouse."**

**Female survey respondent**

**"Seek out people or groups where you can meet people with similar experiences. I found other people's perspectives invaluable."**

**Female survey respondent**

**"Make sure you have a strong network of family and friends and don't be ashamed to ask for help."**

**Female survey respondent**

**"Learn to let go."**

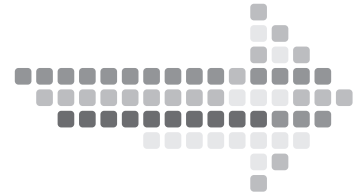
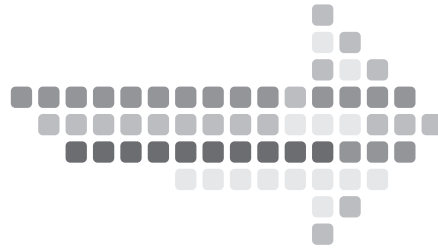
**Female survey respondent**

**"Before you split up with your partner it seems like an impossible, daunting, unthinkable, task. Money, time, work, splitting furniture, etc. But... It's all old memories in no time at all and before you know it you're doing it on your own. You survived."**

**Female survey respondent**

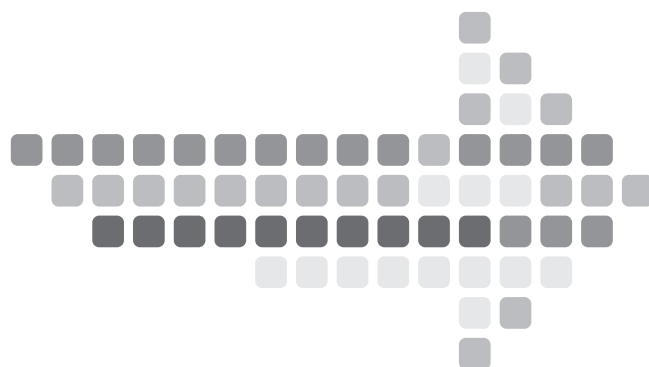
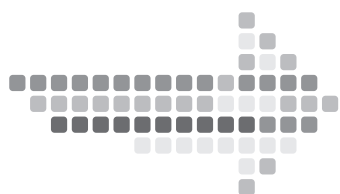
**"Try not to look back and don't beat yourself up about mistakes you may have made in the past. You can't change the past only worrying about it affects the present and the future."**

**Female survey respondent**



## 4. Conclusion

Divorce and separation is a process that is profoundly distressing for all involved. Mothers or fathers end relationships that they feel cannot be preserved and they do not do it lightly. But the conflicts and differences that led to the separation all too often get played out even more after the split, causing pain and turmoil to all involved. Often, everyone wants their old life back but without the conflict. This simply is not possible. In order to manage to reach agreements about anything, mothers, fathers and children need help and support to come to terms with what has been lost so that they can begin to build their lives more positively and constructively. And because they are ashamed, traumatised, isolated and overwhelmed, services need to reach out and market to them. At the same time, because different mothers, fathers and children experience and feel differently, services and policy need to be flexible and responsive.



## 5. Recommendations

The data we have looked at suggests that policy and practice need to accept that splitting up is a hugely emotional and messy process for adults and children. There are no quick fixes. It takes at least two years for things to settle down, but further changes are likely to happen not long afterwards, as parents meet new partners. This means that parents need support over a significant time period if the risks of poor outcomes for children are to be minimised.

A range of professionals and agencies are already in touch with many high conflict families, and could offer more proactive support to mothers, fathers and children at each stage of the process, and before it if they reach out to high conflict families. Schools, and Children's Centre and other universal services have a real role here, but many practitioners may need additional training and support to work with the high levels of conflict and emotions present, and to work sensitively with both mothers and fathers.

Divorce, separation and re-partnering do increase the risk of poor outcomes for children. Preventive services must be in place for both parents and for children. These services must be flexible and responsive and must be actively marketed to parents so as to overcome the shame and stigma associated with divorce and separation. Yet, in all the work to produce local parenting strategies, Parentline Plus has yet to see a strategy that identifies high conflict families as a group who need to be reached by universal services. Nor have we seen a strategy that seeks to reach families who are splitting up, or re-partnering.

Reactions are gendered, and are difficult to categorise neatly, even by gender. Fathers ask for more contact; mothers ask for more contact from fathers who have 'walked away'. There is no single way to describe the needs of either lone mothers or of non-resident fathers. Services and policy must differentiate between the needs of mothers and fathers, and must be sufficiently personalised and flexible to respond to the different experiences and needs of different people.

During the aftermath of divorce and separation children seek and gain from support outside the immediate family. The role of extended friends and family members, and the importance of social networks should be appreciated and included in efforts to increase support to families during the process of family change.

The chances of people making voluntary agreements without active support seem to be very slim. Active support services need to be built up, otherwise the caseload of the new CMEC will be far greater than anticipated. The practical elements of CMEC in setting a base line for expected levels of support will however be helpful to parents, and to those working with them.

Services offering support need to be branded in a way to appeal to mothers and to fathers. And they need to offer support in active, responsive and flexible ways – not simply to provide information.

There is a real risk that lone mothers and their children could be further disadvantaged by voluntary maintenance arrangements, which would jeopardise the government's child poverty reduction targets.

There are real contradictions between what parents have experienced for themselves and how they would like things to be. This is a further indication that blaming parents won't help; marketing support and services could help.

And at the same time, the insights and hope offered by parents to others in their situation are awe inspiring. Parents remain a resource to their children and the community even if for a while they are overwhelmed and distracted. We need to offer support to parents and to children instead of blaming and stigmatising them.

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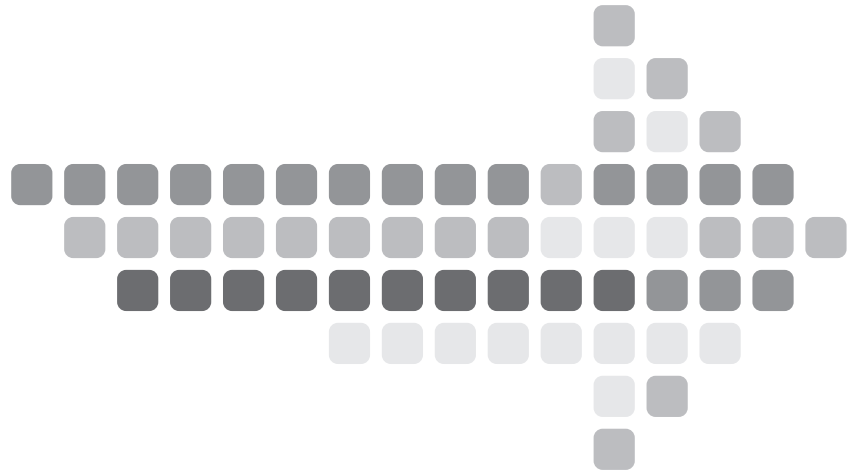
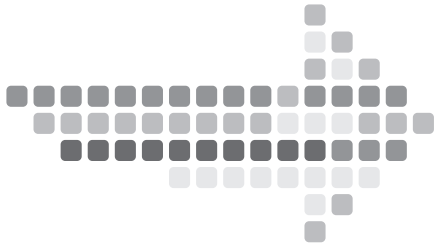
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Parentline Plus is a national charity and a leading organisation in the development and delivery of support for parents and families. We work to recognise and to value the different types of families that exist and to shape and expand the services available to them. We understand that it is not possible to separate children's needs from the needs of their parents and carers and encourage people to see it as a sign of strength to seek help. We believe it is normal for all parents to have difficulties from time to time.



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