



kids in the middle
THE NATIONAL DEBATE ON SUPPORT
FOR SEPARATING FAMILIES



Children and Parental Separation: Managing conflict, Rethinking support



“ I feel my parents' separation has damaged me bad. I got put into hospital for self-harming... I have been on anti-depression tablets. ”

Introduction

Putting Children First

The lives of one in three British children will be affected by parental separation before they reach the age of 16. Every year between 150,000 and 200,000 parental couples separate, prompting the break-up of the family home. Sometimes it can be right for parents to part, but when separation is badly handled children can experience confusion and despair. And although most separating parents want to do the right thing for their children, the children's needs can be overlooked in their parents' emotional turmoil and distress. The problem is not so much bad parents, as parents going through a bad time – which many had not expected and are not prepared for. The result can be children caught in the middle of their parents' conflict, with long term consequences for some - including behavioural problems, health issues, poor educational performance and a greater likelihood of being unable to sustain effective relationships of their own.

More help is needed for separating mothers and fathers to help them steer clear of continuing conflict. And help is also needed for children themselves.

Kids in the Middle

'Kids in the Middle' is a unique national campaign launched by a partnership of family and parenting charities – Relate, One Parent Families/Gingerbread, Families Need Fathers and the Fatherhood Institute - to help tackle the lack of support for children and parents trapped in the misery and turmoil of family breakdown.

Twenty of the country's leading Agony Aunts and Uncles have put their names to the three proposals in this report: Deidre Sanders (The Sun); Denise Robertson (This Morning); Jane Butterworth (News of the World); Bel Mooney (Daily Mail); Zelda West-Meads (Mail on Sunday, YOU magazine); Dr Miriam Stoppard (Daily Mirror); Irma Kurtz (Cosmopolitan); Lesley Garner (Daily Telegraph); Dr Tanya Byron (The Times); Virginia Ironside (The Independent); Sally Brampton (Sunday Times magazine); Linda Blair (Psychologies & Guardian); Ingrid Millar (Chat); Michael Mellis (Company); Suzie Hayman (Various); Gill Cox (Bella); Dr Pam Spurr (MSN); Susan Quilliam (That's Life); Christine Webber (Woman Magazine); Lucy Tobin (Bliss)

We are calling on the Government and relevant agencies to put children's interests at the top of the agenda when it comes to funding, designing and delivering key services for families at risk of separation or experiencing separation or its aftermath.

In what is believed to be the largest survey of its kind, Kids in the Middle has spent the last three months gathering the experiences and views on separation of more than 1500 children and families across the UK. The results of the online survey are summarised in this document and make a compelling case for changes to the way we support families before, during and after breaking up.

We want Britain to follow the lead of Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Sweden Germany and the United States by providing creative support services that make a real difference to the lives of children experiencing parental separation.

We need to change our culture but we do not need a revolution. By committing new resources, by adjusting existing services, by studying and adapting best practice from around the world, and by charting our progress on an annual basis, we will know that we are starting to do the best for our kids in the middle.

Children and Parental Separation: Managing conflict, Rethinking support

This paper draws on a wide range of evidence, including the Kids in the Middle online survey of parents and children affected by separation. It uses recent polling, the latest research and personal stories to make the case for change.

PLEASE NOTE:

Quotations from individuals in this paper have been altered to preserve confidentiality and anonymity

I. Reducing conflict

The evidence is that high levels of parental conflict usually have a profoundly damaging effect on children¹ - and parents and children agree:

- 76% say they believe that children are affected by parents arguing with each other

Continued parental conflict after separation can be extremely damaging and can harm the child's relationship with each parent².

Conflict is most damaging when it is about the child, takes place in front of the child and/or involves violence and threats of violence from father to mother. Post-separation conflict is very often about the child – and takes place in front of the child.

- 1 in 4 (25%) of non resident parents (mainly fathers) who have contact say their time with their child has been affected because the other parent has been reluctant to allow it³
- 1 in 3 (31%) of resident parents (mainly mothers) where there is contact say that they want their children's father to see them more often than he does⁴

Fathers not seeing their children – or seeing them less often - can be linked to their own anger towards their child's mother or their child's mother's anger towards them. It can also reflect a lack of understanding of how much they matter to their children. New partners' attitudes can also be important. Mothers' reluctance to facilitate contact is very often associated with serious welfare concerns about the capacity of their children's father to take good care of them.

Representative samples find that between one quarter and a third of non resident fathers rarely or never see their children. And even when contact is taking place, bad feeling is an issue in nearly a third (30%) of families⁵.

- 69% of the children in our survey describe their experience of parental separation as 'very bad' (43%) or 'bad' (26%)
- 41% of our child-respondents say that there is no post separation contact between their parents – with a further 36% saying their parents get on 'not very well' or 'very badly.'

We want to see... Solutions for separating families which make court battles unnecessary

Court battles about children are the tip of the iceberg to do with conflict between parents after separation. Help for parents in conflict at an earlier stage could reduce the number of cases that end up in court, as well as reaching the 90 per cent of parents who, at the moment, struggle along on their own without any court intervention.

By expanding existing mediation, therapeutic, contact and other practical support services, and ensuring that these also address, as necessary, debt management, child maintenance, finance, health and legal matters, parents affected will get support in a non-confrontational atmosphere where they can focus on the needs of their offspring and more easily consider ways in which both parents can provide substantial support to their children.

“ My parents' separation was bad. They fought over everything - me & my brothers, money, the house, the boat . . . If they see each other in the street they just act like the other one isn't there. They are both always saying horrible things about each other behind each other's backs to me & my brothers. ”

References

1. Reynolds, J. (2001). *Not in Front of the Children?* London: One Plus One.
2. Frosch, C.A., Mangelsdorf, S.C., & McHale, J.L. (2000). Marital behaviour and the security of preschooler-parent attachment relationships. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 14, 144-161
3. Peacey, V. & Hunt, J. (2008). *Problematic contact after separation and divorce? A national survey of parents.* London: One Parent Families/Gingerbread
4. *Ibid*
5. *Ibid*

2. Supporting the children

Current support systems in the UK are failing the children involved in parental separation.

Many of the children involved in parental separation are at a vulnerable stage of their lives.

- 86% of parents in the KIDS IN THE MIDDLE survey said their children were aged 12 or under when separation took place.
- National Data suggest that over a half of children whose parents separate experience the separation by the time they are five years old⁶

Conflict between parents can impact negatively on their parenting capacity, so they become less sensitive and effective parents – which of course is bad for children. And the parents' conflict, in itself, can affect children directly – and badly. Children whose parents fight a lot tend to display their distress in two main ways:

- Children *internalise* the trauma they are facing, leading to feelings of confusion, isolation, depression and prompting their 'withdrawal' and, in rare cases, even suicide
- Children *externalize* their difficulties through displays of aggression and bad behaviour⁷

These problems not only have a significant impact on the individual children but can affect the community around them, in extreme cases involving crime and anti-social behaviour.

- 84% of our survey agreed that services tend to focus on practical issues such as housing, child maintenance, contact and custody in the event of separation but don't offer emotional support for children.

Children affected by the fallout from their parents' conflict are offered minimal opportunity to discuss deeply suppressed feelings in a constructive way. Research on the advice needs of lone parents, for example, found that parents had difficulties obtaining counselling for their children and/or other help with parenting issues, particularly where the children were older – once they reached 11 or 12⁸.

Indeed, a large number of our respondents felt that children were in danger of being neglected, and that they should feel able to express themselves more and talk about the separation rather than bottling up and suppressing feelings.

- 98% of KIDS IN THE MIDDLE survey respondents agree (86% strongly) that children should be a priority when parents are managing a separation.

- 80% agree (42% strongly) that children aren't encouraged to talk about their parents' separation. And 72% of children felt they needed someone to talk to about their feelings.

Many of the survey respondents said that, with hindsight, the lack of support offered to children post-separation was a critical problem.

We want to see... Counselling in schools and other family support services providing more direct work with children

Children whose parents are separating need opportunities to discuss their feelings in a neutral atmosphere and with expert counsellors qualified in engaging with children. To deliver this, and minimise the negative impact of separation on children, properly funded counselling services accessible to all children, must be provided in schools, community settings and other support services.

References

6. *Ibid*

7. Reynolds (2001) *op cit*

8. Moorehead, R., Sefton, M., & Douglas, G. (2004). *The Advice Needs of Lone Parents*. London: One Parent Families



“ It was the worst time of my life...I was 16 and studying for my exams...I started self harming, I skipped school and I failed most of my exams. ”

3. Ensuring services better support separating and separated parents

“ I think there is generally a welfare gap. Legal issues are dealt with professionally but they don't consider the emotional impacts. These are where help should be provided as well. ”

The fall-out from parental conflict and relationship breakdown can leave parents struggling to find the support services they need to deal with the consequences and to adjust to the new realities of parenting apart.

Research has shown that:

- Many resident parents, mainly mothers, feel more unsure about where to go for advice on contact problems than for most other types of problems – and struggle to find an adviser who can deal with them face to face or on the phone.
- Benefits and child support problems involving the CSA are other major areas where many resident parents find it difficult or impossible to find the information and advice they need.
- When it comes to 'non-legal' matters, resident parents generally report feeling lonely and isolated and in need of more practical and emotional support.⁹

Support for non resident parents (mainly fathers) can be even less available. Research funded by the Big Lottery Fund launched today by the Fatherhood Institute, finds:

- Non resident parents are not a legal category (as, for example, homeless people are) so services (such as housing) are essentially blind to their particular needs for accommodation compatible with caring for children part of the time.

- Court-based services are under-funded and staff feel they are not always given the support they would like from statutory services to help families who are living apart.
- Parenting support is almost never made available to non resident parents who need help, for example where there has been a delay in establishing contact and their child's needs have changed and moved on since they last met.
- Where there are concerns about parenting ability and/or the safety of the child, contact is often not possible because there is no local centre where supervised contact can take place or there is a waiting list for a place. A delay in contact at the beginning can lead to no contact.
- The desirability of increased provision of mediation and early intervention services is generally recognised. However, even where these exist they may not be known about, or may be too expensive for many parents

“ (I needed) someone to explain the 'systems' to me sympathetically, and to signpost me to resources etc. My only contact was with 'authority' – DSS staff and solicitors.... No one pointed me towards any emotional support. ”

The Kids in the Middle respondents feel this lack of support keenly:

- 87% agree (54% strongly) that no direct support is offered to stop/prevent conflicts between the parents when around their children
- 89% agree (51% 'strongly') – that more should be done to support parents who are going through a separation
- Around two-thirds feel that they needed more support with their children's behaviour and well-being – as well as more personal guidance

We want to see... New models for delivering relationship support to parents in conflict

A 'seedbed' of ten properly funded and evaluated' pilots to develop and test effective and affordable ways of reaching families dealing with separation and its aftermath, designed to reduce parental conflict and focus on the needs of their children.

Well-resourced contact centres available in every part of the country.

References

9. Moorehead et al *op cit*

What we want

1. Solutions for separating families which make court battles unnecessary

Court battles about children are the tip of the iceberg to do with conflict between parents after separation. Help for parents in conflict at an earlier stage could reduce the number of cases that end up in court, as well as reaching the 90 per cent of parents who, at the moment, struggle along on their own without any court intervention.

By expanding existing mediation, therapeutic, contact and other practical support services, and ensuring that these also address, as necessary, debt management, child maintenance, finance, health and legal matters, parents affected will get support in a non-confrontational atmosphere where they can focus on the needs of their offspring and more easily consider ways in which both parents can provide substantial support to their children.

2. Counselling in schools and other family support services providing more direct work with children

Children whose parents are separating need opportunities to discuss their feelings in a neutral atmosphere and with expert counsellors qualified in engaging with children. To deliver this, and minimise the negative impact of separation on children, properly funded counselling services accessible to all children must be provided in schools, community settings and other support services.

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What's next?

The above policy ideas must necessarily be discussed, debated and refined following consultation with the relevant government departments and key policy makers. We will work closely with service providers and support services to determine the best ways of delivering our aims.

We recommend that ideas are brought together and presented at a top-level conference hosted by government, to explore how children can be prioritised during parental conflict, looking at examples of good practice from the UK and internationally.



The four charities which, together, have created the **Kids in the Middle** initiative are:

relate
the relationship people

Relate is the UK's largest provider of relationship counselling and offers a range of relationship services, information and training for couples, families and individuals together with counselling, peer mentoring and relationships education in schools.


**FAMILIES NEED
FATHERS**

Families Need Fathers provides information and support to separated parents, and campaigns and lobbies for the reform of family law and for the principles of Shared Parenting. Its primary concern is the maintenance of the child's relationship with both parents after separation and divorce.

One parent families
GINGERBREAD
making change happen

One Parent Families|Gingerbread is the leading national charity working for and with single parent families. Alongside campaigning work, it runs a Lone Parent Helpline, membership schemes, and a range of training programmes for both single parents and practitioners.

**fatherhood
INSTITUTE**

The Fatherhood Institute is the UK's leading provider of training, consultancy and publications on father-inclusive practice; and helps shape national and local policies to ensure a father-inclusive approach in family policy.

For more information about the **Kids in the Middle** initiative contact:

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