



Australian Government
Attorney-General's Department

Civil Justice Division

IMPACT OF SEPARATION ON CHILDREN

The two major predictors of children's adjustment following separation consistently identified in the literature are the exposure to interparental conflict and the quality of the parent-child relationship.

Divorce tends to be accompanied by a number of stressors and changes that are associated with child adjustment problems. Important individual differences in children's adjustment and wellbeing following parental divorce are largely attributable to parent factors and family processes after divorce.¹

The issues for children whose parents are separating or divorcing include the potential for the disruption of parenting functions and the potential to raise children's exposure to detrimental parental conflict.

Research on the key predictors of child post-divorce adjustment includes:

- the degree of parental conflict,
- parental adjustment and quality of the parenting,
- the cumulative stress associated with multiple changes,
- residential arrangements and parental remarriage, and
- child characteristics, such as personality and temperament.²

Research and pilot programs have demonstrated the importance of ensuring separating parents hear their children's point of view during the separation process. When children are more directly involved, the level of conflict tends to be reduced and parents can achieve more constructive outcomes.

The adoption of child-inclusive practices and child consultations in the community sector, as part of dispute resolution processes for separating or divorcing parents, are successful initiatives in assisting parents to hear children's point of view. The Family Court has also used a similar process with the adoption of the Child Responsive Program (CRP).

A recent study funded by the Attorney-General's Department by *McIntosh and Long* compared outcomes over one year for two groups of separated parents who attended mediation over parenting disputes. Parents were engaged in either a Child Focused Intervention or in a Child Inclusive Intervention.

¹ Australian Psychological Society, 'Monograph 2 Managing the impact of separation and divorce on children: Overview of the literature' (2007) *Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health in General Practice* p19.

² Australian Psychological Society, 'Monograph 2 Managing the impact of separation and divorce on children: Overview of the literature' (2007) *Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health in General Practice* p20.

The majority of parents reported improved management or resolution of the initial disputes that had brought them to mediation. Across all ages, children in both interventions perceived less frequent and intense conflict between their parents and better resolution of it, with a significant lowering of their own distress in relation to parental discord.³

The Child Inclusive Intervention Group was associated with a number of effects not evident in the other treatment group with the strongest effects for fathers and for children. Significantly better outcomes at the one year post intervention point were observed including:

- lower acrimony in fathers in relation to their former spouses,
- greater improvement in the parental alliance for fathers,
- children's experience of improved emotional availability of their fathers and greater sense of closeness to him,
- greater contentment by children with care and contact arrangements, and less inclination to want to change them,
- greater satisfaction of fathers with care and contact arrangements of their children, despite initially lower levels of overnight contact than the child focused fathers,
- greater stability of care and contact patterns over the year,
- preservation or improvement of the mother-child relationship from the perspectives of both mother and child, and
- children's overall mental health tended to improve over the year after intervention, although 21% of children remained in the clinical range, in contrast to about 15% in the general population.³

In 2006 research was conducted that identified existing strengths and gaps in service provision for children and their families experiencing separation and divorce in Australia. The research D Bagshaw, K Quinn and B Schmidt, *Children & families in transition (CAFIT): towards a child-centred integrated model of practice* found that:

- There was a lack of support for children and parents during the separation process in general, including around issues of grief and loss.
- There is a close relationship between parent separation and parental conflict and the harmful effect this had on the children.
- There is a need to promote safety for children as well as their parents.
- Children were identified as being voiceless in the separation process, despite their view they had the right to contribute to decisions that affect them, they were not given enough information or support to enable them to cope with family transition.
- Families and children in rural and remote areas are more likely to face inadequate service provision.
- The needs and experiences of Aboriginal children and their families were not adequately understand or addressed by non-Aboriginal service providers. (page 7)

In July 2007 the Attorney-General's Department distributed a questionnaire to service providers at the Family Relationship Services Program Conference. The aim was to collect a small snapshot on the range of support and counselling services available for children whose parents have separated or who were in the process of separating.

³ J E McIntosh and C M Long, *Children beyond dispute a prospective study of outcomes from child focused and child inclusive post-separation family dispute resolution final report*, 2006, p7

Information gathered from respondents indicated the limited capacity of services to provide specialised service for children, particularly for children in the younger age brackets (ages 0 to 5). This information also revealed the availability of a wider range of services for older children up to the age of 18. This included tools such as interactive websites, help lines and the provision of counselling and group sessions to assist children with issues relating to loss, grief and coping with changes to their family. Some service providers also offered child-inclusive practises as part of a wider intervention for families.

Respondents also highlighted issues relating to the capacity of services to support children and the need for multi-skilled practitioners to provide a flexible and responsive service for families and children. For many respondents this capacity was linked to services offering full-time employment to staff in regional areas. This also included ongoing training to develop skills specifically relating to services for children, such as child specific counselling, child consultations and child inclusive practice.

In the 2007-08 Budget \$36.9 million was allocated over four years to two new programs to assist parents. The first initiative is an educational program that will assist separated parents in 28 regional areas whose inability to communicate without conflict is affecting their contact with their children.

The second initiative is the new Supporting Children after Separation Program. This program will assist children from separating families in a number of areas of high need across Australia to deal with issues arising from the breakdown in their parent's relationship and to be able to participate in decisions that impact on them. The objective of this new service type is to support children within the context of their family to manage and enhance their relationships during and after family separation.

Further reading list:

Australian Psychological Society (2007). Managing the impact of separation and divorce on children: Overview of the literature. Monograph 2 in A. O'Hanlon, A. Patterson & J. Parham (Series Eds.), *Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health in General Practice*. Adelaide: Australian Network for Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health (Auseinet).

Bagshaw, Dale Margaret, Karolyne Quinn, Birte Schmidt. (2006) *Children & families in transition: towards a child-centred integrated model of practice*. Magill, S. Aust.: Hawke Research Institute for Sustainable Societies, University of South Australia

Mackay, M. (2001) *Through a child's eyes: Child inclusive practice in family relationship services*, Department of Family and Community Services and the Attorney-General's Department, Canberra.

McIntosh J, 'Child inclusion as a principle and as evidence-based practice: Applications to family law services and related sectors' (2007) *AFRC Issues No. 1*
<http://www.aifs.gov.au/afrc/pubs/issues/issues1.html>

Jennifer E. McIntosh and Caroline M. Long (October 2006) *Children Beyond Dispute A Prospective Study of Outcomes from Child Focused and Child Inclusive Post-Separation*

Family Dispute Resolution Final Report Family Transitions Pty Ltd / La Trobe University
2006

http://www.ag.gov.au/www/agd/agd.nsf/Page/Publications_ChildrenBeyondDispute-October2006