

Title: Moving between home and school, the experiences of children of separated parents; discussions with educational professionals

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Abstract

Parental separation not only impacts on family relationships, it also has implications for a child's school life and opportunity to learn. However, there is little understanding of how children of separated parents navigate the relationship between home and school. This paper reports findings from discussions with three education professionals in English schools about their experience of issues children of separated parents face as they move between home and school.

Schools are seen as safe spaces where children who 'have less supportive home lives' can access support to promote their emotional wellbeing (DfE, 2018, p13). This study found staff in primary school tended to be knowledgeable about children's situations, whereas in secondary school, issues came to attention only when parent(s) contacted the school, or through a child's behaviour. Good parental communication was seen as significant in enabling children to move between home and school with ease. Where parental conflict 'spilled over' into schools, staff became aware of the child's situation but did not always feel able to provide appropriate support.

If children wanted to talk about their family situation with someone in school, professionals thought they should have this opportunity but questioned whether staff had appropriate knowledge and skills. The paper considers ways in which staff might support these children through the introduction of a whole school approach, the new Relationships Education curriculum, small group work and work with parents. The framework for understanding children's accommodation of parental separation was considered a useful tool that could support this work (Kay-Flowers, 2019a).

Introduction

As in many Western countries, parental separation is a common experience among children in the United Kingdom (UK), with an estimated one in three children experiencing their parents' separation before the age of 16 (Fortin, Hunt and Scanlan, 2012). Recognised as an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE), parental separation and divorce needs to be understood in the context of risk factors, as well as protective factors, that impact on their experience (DfE, 2018). Risk factors within the family include parental conflict and domestic violence as well as a 'failure to adapt to a child's changing needs', while protective factors that support and promote resilience include 'at least one good parent-child relationship.... affection, support for education and the absence of severe discord' (DfE, 2018, p 14). Children's situations may be further complicated by the reason for separation, such as being a Looked After Child or parental imprisonment; however, the focus of this paper is on parental separation itself. Schools have a central role 'in enabling their pupils to be resilient and to support good mental health and wellbeing' (DfE, 2018, p 4). For professionals to support children of separated parents and promote their resilience, there is a need to understand their experiences as they move between home and school, therefore this area is an area of interest for professionals working in schools.

It is impossible to establish the number of children affected by divorce in the UK because, with the exception of Northern Ireland, such information is not collected; the number of children affected by separation is also unknown. What is known is that almost a quarter (24 per cent) of children living in cohabiting couple families in England and Wales in 2011 live in step families and 3.2 per cent (386,000) of children share their time between two different parental addresses (ONS, 2014; 2017). In most cases their second address was in the same local authority, but 4 per cent had a second address outside the UK, meaning contact with their non-resident parent involved negotiating geographical distance (ONS, 2014).

The lack of understanding of how children of separated parents navigate the relationship between home and school was highlighted by Beausang, Farrell and Walsh (2012), who concluded there was a need to research children's experiences, 'to identify what is occurring and to assist schools to cater better for these young people and their families' (p 353). In my international review of childhood experiences of separation (Kay-Flowers, 2019), children highlighted the following issues when moving between home and school ; moving between two homes, the importance of friends, the role of schools and teachers, and the importance of confidentiality in discussions. These issues, examined in more detail below, were used to frame discussions with three educational professionals to explore their perspectives on the experiences of children of separated parents as they move between home and school. The

framework for understanding children's accommodation of parental separation, developed as part of the study, was shared with these professionals (Kay-Flowers, 2019a). The aim was to deepen understanding of children's experiences and consider ways in which schools might better support and address their needs.

Children found moving between two homes could be inconvenient. There were the practical difficulties of packing and re-packing bags and ensuring the right things, such as school uniform and books, were in the right place at the right time (Butler, Scanlan, Robinson, Douglas and Murch, 2002). There was also the emotional impact of moving between homes; the 'positive anticipation' of contact followed by the sense of sadness when it ended, alongside missing one parent when spending time with the other (Butler et al, 2002; Brand, Howcroft and Hoelson, 2017). Dialogue with parents encouraged more positive feelings about living in two households (Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001).

Friends held particular significance for children of separated parents. Remaining in the same school was important, as it allowed children to keep in contact with existing friends who could be a valuable source of support (Butler, Scanlan, Robinson, Douglas and Murch, 2003). Engaging in fun activities, such as listening to music, playing sport, art, reading or talking, could provide a welcome distraction from what was going on at home (Butler et al, 2002; Wade and Smart, 2002). It was useful to talk with friends who had experienced their parents' separation because they were more likely to understand (Butler et al, 2002). This could help guide expectations and normalise feelings so children did not 'feel alone, different or confused' (Morrison, Fife, and Hertlein, 2017, p. 51). However, it was important their confidante could be trusted to keep personal information confidential (Wade and Smart, 2002). Some children reported not telling anyone, because they feared becoming upset if they talked about it or because they were embarrassed or ashamed about what was happening and feared being teased or rejected by friends (Butler et al, 2003).

Some children saw schools as 'having a monitoring role with the opportunity to intervene and offer timely individual support' (Kay-Flowers, 2019, p168). Children thought teachers should be aware of changes in their family circumstances so they could understand the cause of any deterioration in their work or behaviour (Butler et al, 2003). Teachers were seen as providing indirect support through interesting lessons, the opportunity to mix with friends, and discussions in circle time or Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) lessons (Wade and Smart, 2002).

Some children would have liked the opportunity to talk to someone about the separation, maybe a teacher, a youth worker or counsellor, while others would have liked 'the opportunity to talk to peers who had experienced parental separation', believing this would have provided

reassurance 'that their family situation could improve over time' (Kay-Flowers, 2019, p169). However, while some teachers appeared approachable, many children kept their home lives private, due to their authority role and for fear of being identified as having a 'problem' by their class mates (Bagshaw, 2007; Wade and Smart, 2002). Children had reservations about the teachers' ability or knowledge of how best to help and 'were particularly concerned about being the focus of unnecessary (and unwelcome) fuss' (Butler et al, 2003, p.177). Classroom assistants and learning mentors were often seen as more approachable than teachers (Wade and Smart, 2002).

Where children had discussions with counsellors, they highlighted the importance of confidentiality, of being 'in charge of whether or not information was passed on' and their discussions being kept private unless they agreed to 'something being said to their parents' (Wade and Smart, 2002, p.39).

Methods

The aim of this small scale study was to:

1. explore educational professionals' awareness of the issues children of separated parents experience as they move between home and school
2. identify issues that come to their attention in relation to home-school partnerships
3. provide space to consider ways in which children of separated parents might be supported in school

An 'interview guide approach' was adopted in which topics were identified in advance with the order of questions determined by the interviewer during the course of the interview (Patton, 1980). Emulating a 'conversation', this approach allowed a systematic approach to the collection of data while at the same time providing sufficient flexibility to allow any gaps to be 'anticipated and closed' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018, p.510).

The target audience was professionals working in pastoral roles in mainstream school settings, as they were most likely to be aware of children's home situations and work within the context of home-school partnerships in their daily work. It was restricted to those working in English schools to ensure professionals were working within the same policy context. The aim was to gain a range of perspectives by interviewing professionals working in different roles and with different age groups. Ethical approval was sought and granted by the university where the study took place.

Working in the School of Education at one university while undertaking this study at another, I had access to an extensive professional network. Recruitment involved sending an email invitation to those who met the criteria inviting them to take part in the research study. It was accompanied by an information sheet explaining the aims of the study and that participation would involve a semi-structured interview, which with their permission, would be voice recorded. Their comments would be anonymous and their identities, as well as their place of work, would be kept confidential. For this reason, professionals would be identified by their generic job title only. This was to ensure they were able to talk openly and honestly as well as to maintain the privacy and confidentiality of the children and families with whom they worked (BERA, 2018).

A consent form reiterating what participants were being asked to do and outlining the questions that would be used in the interview was sent to those professionals who indicated a willingness to participate. They were asked to sign, date and return the form by email prior to a suitable time for the interview being arranged.

While initially five professionals indicated their willingness to take part, workload constraints meant that only three were able to participate. PR1 was employed as a Deputy Head Teacher (Pastoral) in a secondary school, PR2 as a Deputy Head Teacher in a primary school and PR3 as a Social Worker employed by a charity working in primary and secondary schools, as such the sample met the criteria of providing a range of different perspectives. Having worked in these roles for a number of years, the professionals had a wide range of experience and as this was a small scale, exploratory study it was decided to proceed with the study using this small sample group although the limitations of such a small sample are recognised.

The interviews, on average lasted about 60 minutes. Once interviewees started talking about children's experiences, they recalled instances where issues had come to the attention of staff and/or wider school community. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded and categorised according to the following categories: professional's experiences, children's responses, parent's responses, family relationships and support, professional's interventions and support strategies (Cohen et al, 2018). This process guided analysis of the interview transcripts, allowing particular themes to emerge from their accounts. The emergent themes were incidence of parental separation, family arrangements, parental communication, parental conflict, support needs and involvement of specialists, they are used to report the findings in the Results section.

Results

As Deputy Head Teachers responsible for pastoral care, PR1 and PR2 responded to issues relating to children of separated parents on a case by case basis as they arose. In her role as a Social Worker, PR3 worked specifically with children at the intersection of school and home, often meeting families away from school and acting as a bridge between these two aspects of the child's world.

Incidence

The Deputy Head Teachers found it difficult to assess the incidence of parental separation among children in their schools. In the primary school, PR2 commented on the changing nature of families and how the number of children affected by parental separation had increased over time

It's hard to say separation because we've got situations where mum and dad don't live together but maybe never have. You've got parents who are not married, so you've got two sets of names and then you've got extended families where you're not sure whether parents are separated or not. I've been here 12 years and there are more families affected in our current cohort than there have been in the past - Interviewee PR2

PR1 thought maybe it was the case that by the time children came to Secondary School parental separation had often already taken place because

You don't get to hear about it at secondary level. Maybe because you don't see parents at the school gates and they're more reserved, or they think you're going to form judgements, but I think we find out less, or maybe the children just deal with it in their own way and don't want help - Interviewee PR1

Where she was aware of parents separating it was usually through one parent contacting the school to say they were 'splitting up' and could she 'watch out for their child' because 'it may affect their work, they may be upset' and if so could she inform them. Sometimes she was contacted by both parents

Wanting to give you their version of what's gone on – quite often it is the Dads who want to make sure they get all the information [about their child] because they fear that that won't happen now they are living somewhere else - Interviewee PR1

Sometimes a child came to her attention because he was 'in trouble' and in dealing with the incident she realised he was upset about something at home, parental separation was a common feature in these situations.

The majority of children PR3 worked with lived in lone parent families, parental separation was commonplace and for some children, given the nature of the separation and post separation arrangements, was a dominant theme in their lives. Many children's parents had separated a long time before they came to see her but, sometimes, she worked with children whose parents were separating and faced difficult situations. Most children were referred by Deputy

Head Teachers due to behavioural issues, particularly around anger and managing emotions, but on occasions children asked their teacher if they could speak to someone and a number of children came to her attention in this way.

Family arrangements

In primary school, PR2 saw a range of family arrangements, there were those children

who have parents that have separated and you just wouldn't know. There are no outward signs, family life appears to be quite stable, they move easily between Mum and Dad, they're very well organised - Interviewee PR2

and

others where they travel on such an emotional roller coaster because Mum doesn't speak to Dad and they have to be dropped off by grandparents or there's mediation between their parents - Interviewee PR2

Parental conflict, a key factor in these children's experiences, will be considered later in this section.

In his experience, where children spent half the week with Mum and half the week with Dad, they were more likely to have a '*definite routine*', which tended to work better for children than spending alternate weeks with each parent, he found children in these living arrangements '*the most unsettled*'. Grandparents often played a significant role in looking after, and caring for children, particularly where fathers had residence or where one parent had remarried and the other had not. In these cases, he saw the extended family's involvement '*almost as a safety net*'.

Many of the children PR3 worked with raised family relationships as an issue in their lives. Family situations tended to settle once post separation arrangements had been put in place, enabling children to move between their separated parents more easily. In some cases, this led children to view their parents' separation as a positive development. She referred to one boy she had seen that morning who thought his parents' separation

was a good thing... 'it's great now because they don't see each other so there's no arguing and I see Dad' - Interviewee PR3

and a girl in another school who

sees it more as a positive thing. She gets two sets of Christmas presents [and] because all her friends' parents are separated it's almost like she's in with the crowd and she just manages it - Interviewee PR3

In these cases, there was evidence of parental conflict ending and a routine being put in place enabling children to maintain relationships with both parents and move between homes.

She questioned whether shared care was '*always healthy*' because she was aware of some children who shared their time between their parents who did not speak to one another. In such cases children had to '*manage*' the way they moved between the two homes. For example, having a set of clothes '*at Dad's that they have to take off and leave before they go to Mum's*', this created stress for children, and she viewed such arrangements as '*unhealthy*'.

PR2 did not comment on children's family arrangements, perhaps reflecting the increasing independence of pupils at this age and less awareness of family arrangements among staff in secondary school.

Parental communication

Difficulties arose when children moved between two homes and communication between parents was poor. In secondary school, PR1 found this could lead to children not having their homework with them on the right day and school needing to contact parents to ask who the child was with and whether they could bring it in.

Given the age of children in primary school, their drop off and collection from school was usually overseen by adults, which meant issues tended to be experienced more directly. PR2 gave an example of a recent residential trip in which the

mum had packed the bag but the children had stayed with dad the night before and he had dropped them off and gone and forgotten the bag. Merry hell played loose. The child was stuck in the middle of this not wanting to say anything because there's going to be an issue between them - Interviewee PR2

Issues could also arise about who to contact if there was an emergency relating to the child in school, as PR2 explained

You need to phone priority 1, whoever has been chosen to be that and then you go down the list until you find someone you can contact. In those situations where you're asked why did you phone someone it's because they've still got parental responsibility.....There's those situations when the children say 'oh, don't bother anyone. I'll stay in school' they'll be throwing up and they're saying 'No, I can't go home' they know that someone's not available or it's going to cause an issue - Interviewee PR2

In his experience these children felt '*caught in the middle*', they do not want to '*choose one parent over the other*' and '*become part of the problem*'. He found these anxieties '*bubble up*' and affect children's daily lives in school, causing a child to be distracted and often impacting on their relationships with staff and other children.

PR3 commented on the isolation some children felt and thought it beneficial for children to realise other children had separated parents. She described a primary school child who lived with her mother, never saw her father and had a lot of anxieties which meant she found it

difficult to go into the classroom. Using group work with her friends, the child would play games until *'eventually she'd feel confident enough to go in to the classroom'*. PR3 recalled using a board game of feelings

one day the question was about a mum and dad who were separated and it was an issue they had to resolve so all the girls round the table went 'Oh that's easy cos [sic] my Mum and Dad are separated' - Interviewee PR3

This was a revelation to the girl who said afterwards

'I thought I was the only one whose Mum and Dad were separated. I thought it was just me'. She felt so much better knowing that she wasn't the only one - Interviewee PR3

Within the classroom, it was recognised certain activities could create particular anxieties for children. For example, the question of whom a child chose to make a card for on special occasions such as, Christmas, Mother's Day and Father's Day. As PR2 pointed out such situations were handled sensitively by staff and were easily resolved but they could create considerable anxiety for children.

Parental Conflict

Both Deputy Headteachers described how sometimes parental conflict 'spilled over' into school, with Parents' Evenings a *'flash point'* for some separated parents. PR1 gave an example of how one mother became very angry

because her ex-husband was in the same hall and she couldn't understand why I couldn't just 'turf him out' - Interviewee PR1

PR2 described a similar experience in the primary school, where, he was presented with separated parents *'having an argument about their child and trying to put the blame on each other'*, he found himself becoming *'a mediator between them'*.

They were aware of the negative impact of such public displays on the children. PR1 thought that as children grow older, their *'embarrassment'* rises because they become *'more socially aware'* of their parents' poor behaviour and described how in the above incident

The poor child was just standing in the yard just waiting for this to go away - Interviewee PR1

PR2 referred to how the children look

burdened. They look weighed down. You can see it on their faces - Interviewee PR2

Sometimes parental conflict was displayed more privately. Such as when a mother wanted *'counselling for the children whether they want it or not'* and had been *'persistent and regular in her communications with school'*, in response the father had started to contact the school

'regularly and persistently' to make his views known, PR1 found this made the situation much worse for the children.

In another situation PR1 was dealing with, the parents were separating and could not agree who the children should live with. They still lived in the same house and the matter had gone before the family court, so the situation had become protracted, impacting on wider family relationships and causing the children's relationship with their maternal grandparents to drift. Aware of the impact this was having on the children, PR1 referred them to PR3 who was working with both children. Struggling with the uncertainty of the situation, PR3 found they had different responses.

The older child, aged 15 was

angry and completely refused to speak to his Mum. He was adamant he would be living with Dad and didn't want anything to do with his Mum - Interviewee PR3

In their meetings PR3 encouraged him not to *'cut things off completely but to keep the door open'* to future contact.

Whereas the younger child, aged 12 was

not informed of anything. He doesn't know who he's going to live with, where he's going to live, whether they're going to live in the same house. And he really wants to know ... Obviously the atmosphere is awful and he doesn't want to ask his parents - Interviewee PR3

Struggling to verbalise how he felt, PR3 used drawings to support their discussions and described how he was *'stuck in the middle of all the chaos'*. She knew he did not want to be asked his views on who he wanted to live with and that ideally, he wanted his parents to remain together. In her view, the situation was made worse by the lack of explanation from his parents and lack of decision-making leading to a prolonged period of uncertainty. She offered to speak with his parents if he wanted, but he declined and she respected his wishes.

The transitions in his life meant he had experienced

a new school, the loss of the safety of primary school and some of their friendship groups. It was all happening all at once and then teenage hormones kick in as well. All of a sudden his perfect world has 'gone to pot' really - Interviewee PR3

In other cases, where children of separated parents were caught up in on-going conflict, she found she had to remind parents that her role was to support the children. This was often necessary in cases where conflict continued after separation, as she explained

In some of the cases...there has been domestic violence in the past and children see Dad now, and then you get bickering – they'll use the child to score points off each other. I just clearly say I'm here to work for the children. I'll phone up because the children are late for school and they'll

say 'it's because he was with him last night and he'll have had a drink and not got up. That's why I'm not with him' and I'm sure if I'm hearing it then the children still must be listening to that on handovers - Interviewee PR3

Support needs

When asked about children's support needs, the professionals thought if children wanted to talk to someone in school about their family situation, this opportunity ought to be available to them. However, they were unclear who would take on this responsibility and how it might be arranged.

In the primary school, PR2 found children sometimes talked to teachers about their parents' separation but more often they talked to teaching assistants with whom they worked on a one to one basis or in small groups because

It's a different relationship with a teaching assistant, there is a different level of formality. They're often working one to one or in smaller groups and children seek out and confide in them - Interviewee PR2

He had been the only male working in the primary school for a long time and found some of the boys spoke to him about their parents' separation, as he pointed out *'they choose anyone they feel comfortable with'*.

In secondary school, the pastoral team were available for children to talk to but in practice PR1 found children rarely talked about their parents' separation, instead issues tended to come to staff attention as a result of incidents relating to their behaviour. In response PR1 would speak with the children and had had some *'good conversations'* with them in her office but was aware that when she saw them around school, they appeared nervous in case she was *'going to ask are you OK now?'* While she would not do that, she understood their nervousness.

She explained how another member of the pastoral team who experienced her parents' separation as a child drew on her experience to work with the children to say

I know how you're feeling and I know you can get to this point and this is how we need to do it. - Interviewee PR1

She thought this had been *'quite useful'* because

'sometimes that's all the child needs really, to know that somebody else knows how they feel - Interviewee PR1

While schools were *'the best point of contact and probably know more about the children than anyone else'* she thought providing opportunities for children to talk about these issues raised practical issues in publicising such opportunities and could place a *'tremendous onus on*

schools'. She questioned whether teachers had sufficient training to address the issues children might raise and thought even if they attended training courses, they would be worried whether they would be '*saying the right thing*'. In her view it was probably better to '*use another professional*' who had relevant expertise, such as the social worker, PR3, who worked in the school, in situations that were particularly difficult or protracted. She reported how the children '*like going to talk to her because she isn't a teacher and she's a bit more detached than we are*'. PR3's role was seen as addressing an important need and her expertise, a significant asset to the school.

PR3 was of the view that children's voices were not heard enough in primary schools unless there was a safeguarding issue. She recognised the desire some children had to talk to someone outside the family about the separation and thought incorporating some teaching about parental separation into the curriculum might be beneficial. This would acknowledge the reality of parental separation, reduce isolation, provide peer support and thereby promote children's resilience. It might also be a way of addressing situations such as in one primary school, where to the best of the school's knowledge, none of the children's parents lived together. She recognised teachers' anxieties and their fear of being seen as '*prying*' by parents, particularly in primary schools, as well as the limited resources and materials available for working with children of separated parents. She also noted how, when teaching Religious Studies, some schools shied away from teaching about separated parents.

She saw benefits in children being able to talk to someone who was not a teacher and therefore was '*a bit more detached*', as in her role, but identified some of the dilemmas this could create. Citing the example of a boy above who was clearly upset by the on-going conflict at home, she questioned the extent to which she could bring about change in his situation, was concerned about his emotional wellbeing and questioned the effectiveness of her input.

She was aware of some books and resources available for working with children of separated parents but the materials available for working with children in groups were very limited. She identified the need for the development of further resources.

Involvement of Specialists

PR3's role meant she provided on-going support to children in schools who needed additional support and their families. She worked in PR1's school, where the management team had decided a Social Worker was better equipped to deal with some of the complex situations some children faced.

Sometimes issues led to the involvement of outside organisations, such as the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS). On-going parental conflict was a

common theme in such cases and the Deputy Head Teachers were usually asked to report on a child's progress and attendance. In secondary school sometimes CAFCASS Officers came to meet the children in school.

Discussion

The professionals recognised parental separation is an issue for some children, particularly where children were caught up in their parents' conflict or their living situation was uncertain. The loss of contact with a parent was often unknown to staff, only coming to their attention through discussions with children. Yet these experiences create psychological stress for children and place them at increased risk of developing mental health problems (DfE, 2018). On the other hand, when parental conflict ended and a routine for contact was put in place (protective factors), children often viewed the separation as a positive development, as PR3 had seen.

Children spend a lot of time at school, staff know a lot about their lives and a range of professionals are employed there, meaning schools should be a 'safe space' for children to access support and talk about issues of concern to them should they wish. These professionals acknowledged the role schools can play in promoting the resilience of pupils, particularly those with less supportive home lives but questioned the extent to which schools are adequately equipped to undertake this role.

The discussions highlighted the lack of awareness staff often had about whether a child had experienced parental separation, as well as some of the issues in working with children of separated parents. Teaching about family relationships as a way of informing children about parental separation and use of small group work to support children and reduce their isolation were identified as ways of supporting children although the limited resources available to support such work was recognised. The five challenges of awareness, curriculum, small group work, limited resources and working with separated parents will be considered in the following section.

Awareness

Professionals were aware of the issues some children experienced as they moved between home and school, either because children talked to them directly about their situation - often prompted by an incident in school - or because their parent(s) advised the school of the changed situation. In such situations, professionals showed a sensitive, individualised, child centred approach, supporting the child as best they could within school and referring them on to specialist services, where necessary.

However, they were not always aware of a child's family situation and sometimes issues arose in school where conflicting separated parents came together and the family dynamics were played out in public. These could create 'flashpoint moments' in which the parents' conflict was witnessed by staff, wider school community and other parents, leading to considerable embarrassment for the child. Professionals empathised with these children and appreciated they may want to talk about their family situation in school. They felt they should have this opportunity but questioned who was best placed to take on this role and how it might be done.

Children want schools to be aware of changes in their family life so teachers can understand changes in their learning or behaviour, or so they can intervene to offer support if necessary (Butler et al, 2003; Kay-Flowers, 2019). This starts with effective communication between professionals and parents in the context of trusting home-school partnerships. It also involves professionals in school who work directly with the child, sharing information 'on a need to know' basis, having regard for the family's right to a private life (Section 8, Human Rights Act, 1998), balanced against a child's right to be heard in matters affecting their daily life (Article 12, UNCRC) and any child welfare concerns.

A first step is to use a whole school approach to increase staff awareness of those children in school who have separated parents. Increased awareness of their situation among staff would reduce children's anxiety, thereby improving their ability to concentrate and to learn. It would encourage more sensitive responses regarding absence of homework, how classroom activities are set up and emergency contacts. This requires good communication between administrative staff and pastoral staff as well as Special Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs) who often take a lead in home-school partnerships. Administrative staff are aware of changes in a child's circumstances, such as their address and quality of school communication with the child's parents, as well as those children who have recently started attending the school. With these first indications of a child's changed situation, they are able to identify those children who may benefit from additional support at an early stage.

Children facing a number of changes such as the transition between primary and secondary school at same time as their parents' separate, face particular challenges (Flowerdew and Neale, 2003). This calls for effective communication between pastoral staff in each school to work with parents to support their transition and vigilance in identifying those children who may need additional support in coping with these changes.

Curriculum

PR3 thought children would benefit from discussion about family relationships within the curriculum. This would aid children's understanding, support the adjustment of those

experiencing changes in their own lives, reduce their isolation and increase their resilience. She suggested incorporating teaching about parental separation and different family types into the curriculum but recognised some teachers may feel uncomfortable teaching this topic.

Her view is supported by the DfE which recognises the value of the curriculum in promoting positive mental wellbeing and the opportunities offered through Relationships Education (RE), Relationships and Sex Education (RSE), Health Education and PSHE (2018). The introduction of the RE curriculum in English schools from September 2020 means all children in primary schools (aged 4-11) will learn about 'families and people who care for me' (DfE, 2019, p22) as well as 'features of healthy friendships, family relationships and other relationships [they] may encounter', helping them to 'recognise any less positive relationships' (DfE, 2019, p19). The RSE curriculum to be introduced in all secondary schools (aged 11-16) at the same time will continue to focus on families and respectful relationships. Supported by the introduction of 'Health Education', teaching children about mental wellbeing, it aims to provide 'new subject content [that] will give' children 'the knowledge and capability to take care of themselves and receive support if problems arise' (DfE, 2019, p 4).

These curriculum developments will acknowledge different family types and the reality of parental separation, they should aid children's understanding, enable them to identify issues of concern in their own lives and access support if needed. In this way, children of separated parents may feel less isolated and be able to access informal peer support.

However, there are challenges to implementing these curriculum changes. Teachers may have anxieties about teaching these subjects because of limited academic knowledge and understanding of certain topics, as well the emotional content which may touch upon their own experiences of family life. Staff training, sensitive to their needs and experiences, as well as the development of resources and materials to support delivery of the curriculum, is needed. Teachers may also be concerned about how the teaching of Relationship Education is viewed by parents, particularly given recent experiences in some Birmingham schools, where protests outside schools have led to a High Court injunction.

Small group work

The professionals responded to issues raised by children of separated parents in schools. While PR1 and PR2 responded on an individual basis, PR3 found small group work a useful strategy with some children requiring additional support. Group work enabled children to consider different case study family scenarios and identify strategies they might be able to take away and use in their own lives. In PR3's experience, this reduced their isolation, helped

them gain a greater understanding of their own situation and how their situation may improve over time, thereby providing valuable informal support.

The value of support from peers who have also experienced parental separation has been recognised elsewhere (Butler et al, 2002; Morrison et al, 2017). Peer support programmes, aimed at fostering emotional resilience in children experiencing bereavement and loss through parental separation, have been delivered by Rainbows, a bereavement support charity, for some time. Staff members, trained as facilitators, use a range of activities to deliver programmes in schools and are able to provide continuity and support outside sessions. Children participating in these programmes have been reassured to find others shared the experience of parental separation and gained confidence in talking about their feelings, while professionals and parents have found it an effective way of supporting children (Halpenny, Greene and Hogan, 2008; Hutchings, 2011; Rainbows Evaluation, Research and Development Committee, 2019).

Limited resources

The opportunities teachers had to support individual children were recognised but PR1 and PR3 questioned their confidence in this role. The steps needed to safeguard and protect a child's welfare were clear to staff through school policies and training events, while those to support children in building their resilience were less so. One way of addressing this was to employ a Social Worker (PR3) whose skill set was seen as more suited to this work; this was the decision taken by the leadership team in PR1's school. However, PR3 identified the need to develop additional resources that would help children in building their resilience, enabling them to protect themselves physically and emotionally in more difficult family situations.

During the discussions, I shared the framework for understanding children's accommodation of parental separation, developed from the findings from my study, in which factors influencing children's accommodation of parental separation over time are identified (see Figure 1) (Kay-Flowers, 2019). Some of the factors were familiar to the professionals, such as, the importance of good communication between parents, the negative impact of parental conflict and the positive role of grandparents. [Embed Figure 1 here]

The framework shows that children who had a:

- high level of accommodation saw the separation as a positive improvement in their life and showed full acceptance of post-separation changes
- medium level of accommodation saw the separation as neither a positive improvement nor a significant loss but, rather 'it is as it is'

- low level of accommodation had a remaining sense of loss and struggled to accept the post-separation changes

The factors influencing levels of accommodation are identified on the axes; they are reactions, support and talking, communication and conflict. Those factors likely to bring about a high level of accommodation are identified in the green sector, a medium level in the yellow sector and a low level in the red sector. The framework enables professionals to understand the experiences most commonly associated with each particular level of accommodation.

In discussing the framework, the professionals thought it would be beneficial for those working with children of separated parents and their families to be aware of these factors. It would ensure their work was research informed and focused on children's needs and could support the delivery of the Relationship Education curriculum and work with parents.

The framework is not particularly accessible for children. Therefore, a child-friendly version supported by a range of planned activities, in the form of a pack which professionals can use in their direct work with children has been developed.

Working with separated parents

As heads of pastoral teams, PR1 and PR2's focus was on supporting children's learning and addressing any issues relating to their welfare that might impact on this. Working with parents was an integral part of their role. When in school they act 'in loco parentis' for children, making decisions that are in a child's 'best interests' and ensuring they are safeguarded at all times (Children Act, 1989). Aware of procedures and the need to liaise with child protection agencies where necessary, they were confident in addressing safeguarding issues. However, there was a wariness sometimes when working with parents, possibly around being drawn into their conflict, into issues relating to the introduction of a new partner or losing focus on the child.

PR3 was able to work intensively with children needing additional support, providing a bridge between children's home and school lives. Adopting a holistic view of the child and a solution focused approach, she aimed to work with the child and their family, unless the child stated they did not want this, in which case she worked with them alone. While respecting their right to determine this for themselves, she recognised in certain instances their wishes might need to be overridden, due to concerns for their welfare. She worked with parents in recognising their child's needs and identifying ways of addressing them, often she found a reminder that the child was her focus was needed. She thought the framework for understanding children's accommodation of parental separation provided a useful structure for framing these discussions.

Conclusion

While the professionals had considerable experience, having worked in their roles for a number of years, it is recognised these discussions are based on three people's experiences. It may be the case that a larger sample group, or one drawn from a wider range of professionals, or from a different geographical area, may have highlighted other issues. Nonetheless, the findings are important in identifying some of the issues children of separated parents experience in moving between home and school.

These professionals were unaware of the extent of parental separation among children in their school, particularly in the secondary school where parents were less visible. Through experience they were aware some children wanted to talk about their family situation in school; they were keen to support these children and be responsive to their needs, but there was a lack of clarity about how they might do this.

Adopting a whole school approach, so that when changes in a child's life are communicated to administrative staff in school, they are shared effectively with pastoral and support staff as well as teachers would act as an early alert system for those children who might benefit from additional support. Combined with further training for teachers and teaching assistants, this offers the prospect of a more informed, child centred approach to supporting children of separated parents. For example, with the practicalities of moving between two homes, when uniform or homework can end up in the wrong house. Such training would also assist staff in managing parental conflict when it spills over into school and encourage their confidence in dealing with incidents. The framework for understanding children's accommodation of parental separation is a tool that could support this work (Kay-Flowers, 2019)

A more universal approach to supporting children of separated parents may be brought about by the introduction of the new RE and RSE curricula in September 2020 which focuses on family relationships, healthy relationships and mental wellbeing. These developments offer the prospect of acknowledging some of the issues some children face within the taught curriculum and provide the opportunity for children to gain informal support from their peers. This could be linked to a whole school mental health policy, so that support can be put in place for those children experiencing this adverse childhood experience and attendant risk factors (DfE, 2018). Such policies provide an early alert system to identifying children experiencing difficulties in their home lives, and provide staff with the information necessary to support them, enabling them to recognise where issues are more intractable and children need access to more specialist support. However to date, few schools have developed a mental health policy. Such policies, where they exist, should be communicated to parents via the school newsletter

and website and to children via assemblies and RE and RSE lessons to ensure universal coverage and awareness.

The way in which children experience parental separation is unique to them. It may bring a difficult family situation to an end and, with protective factors in play, over time, lead a child to view it as a positive improvement in their life (DfE, 2018; Kay-Flowers, 2019). This paper outlines some strategies for professionals working with children of separated parents who 'have less supportive home lives, who may not have a trusted adult they can talk to', in the hope they prove useful in addressing their needs at an early stage and strengthen their resilience, thereby promoting their emotional wellbeing (DfE, 2018, p 13).

(8005 words)

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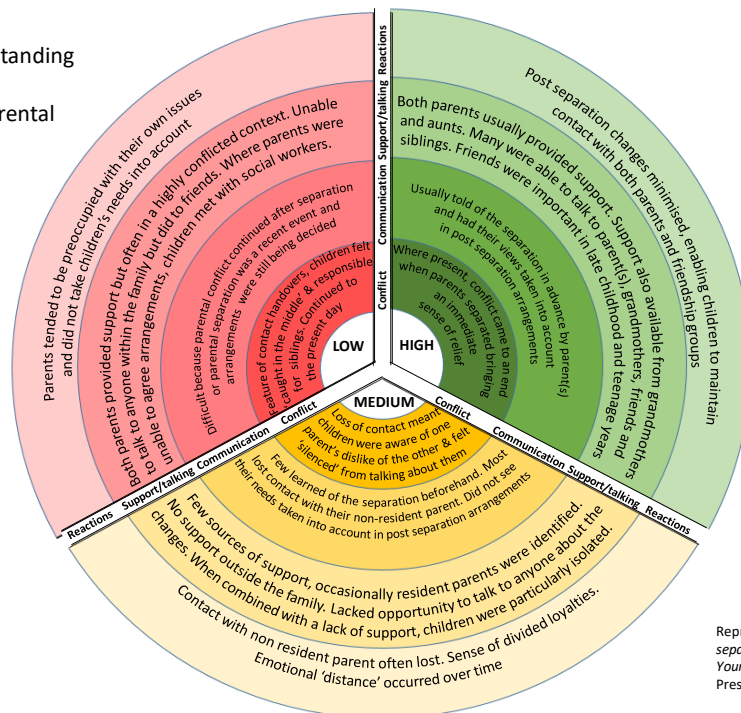
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Figure 1. Framework for understanding children's accommodation of parental separation.

Framework for understanding children's accommodation of parental separation



Reproduced from *Childhood experiences of separation and divorce; Reflections from Young Adults* by Susan Kay-Flowers, Policy Press 2019