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Empowering children in coping with their parents' separation; the views of young adults looking back on their childhood experiences

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Empowering Children in Coping With Their Parents' Separation: The Views of Young Adults Looking Back on Their Childhood Experiences

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Empowering Children in Coping With Their Parents' Separation: The Views of Young Adults Looking Back on Their Childhood Experiences

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Correspondence: Susan Kay-Flowers (s.j.kay-flowers@ljmu.ac.uk)**Received:** 14 August 2024 | **Revised:** 9 May 2025 | **Accepted:** 13 June 2025**Keywords:** children | coping | empowerment | parental separation | perspectives

ABSTRACT

Parental separation is a process that impacts children's lives before parents decide to separate, during the physical separation and in the adjustment that follows, which may continue for many years. This study draws on the retrospective accounts of 30 young adults (aged 18–30) who experienced parental separation in childhood, to identify what they said was important to them at the time and what helped them to 'accommodate' the changes parental separation brought over time, thereby giving 'voice' to young adults' childhood experiences. Using a fictionalized case study scenario to create a video clip linked to an online questionnaire, participants were asked how they experienced their parents' separation and the post-separation changes that affected their lives. Their accounts were categorized according to the level of 'accommodation' (their satisfaction and acceptance) shown. In 20 accounts, separation was seen as a positive improvement in their life and showed a high level of accommodation. Focusing on these accounts, this paper deepens understandings of children's lived experience of parental separation, particularly in relation to the intersecting dynamics affecting their everyday lives, and identifies ways in which children's coping ability can be enhanced through families' life practices and the opportunity to talk to someone about their experiences.

1 | Introduction

This paper draws on a qualitative research study which examined young adults' reflections on their childhood experiences of separation and divorce, to give 'voice' to their everyday experiences and enable factors they said were important to them in accommodating post-separation changes to be identified (Kay-Flowers 2019). The term 'separation' is used to incorporate separation and divorce. In deepening understandings of children's lived experiences and the dynamics affecting their everyday lives, it was important the findings could be used to support children in coping with their parents' separation. Therefore, the 'Framework for understanding children's accommodation of parental separation' was created as a tool to support those living or working with children experiencing parental separation and adjusting to the changes it brings (Kay-Flowers 2019a).

Focusing on the factors that supported children in accommodating their parents' separation, the paper will identify ways in which children can be empowered in coping with their parents' separation through family life practices, children's own actions and support from practitioners. It starts by outlining the context for the study before going on to review relevant literature.

2 | Context

Parental separation is a process that impacts on children's lives before parents decide to separate, during the physical separation and in the adjustment that follows, which may continue for many years, and into adulthood (Fortin et al. 2012). In this way, it can become a continuous theme or backdrop informing adult

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decision-making as well as child-rearing and family-life practices (Smart 2006).

My interest in children's experiences of parental separation stems from previous work as a Family Court Advisor in the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) in England and my concern about how children's voices are heard and represented in the Family Courts. While listening to children's views about their 'wishes and feelings' in relation to their family situation in private law proceedings (Children Act, 1989, section 7), it was sometimes challenging to convey their views accurately and fully in a written court report that would be read by their parents which may place the child at risk of potential harm. Tensions arose between recognizing a child's right to participate (UNCRC, Article 12) and their right to protection (UNCRC, Article 19) (see James 2007). A recent report shows concerns remain about how often the voice of the child is heard in private law proceedings (Hargreaves et al. 2024).

The impact of parental separation and outcomes for children has been subject to extensive investigation. Children's views on their experiences of parental separation have received far less attention, and young adults' voices on their childhood experiences remain largely absent from the literature. Given the passage of time, young adults appear particularly well placed to reflect on their childhood experiences of parental separation and identify what helped them in coping with their parents' separation. Recognizing the potential value of young adults' accounts in understanding how they adjusted to post-separation changes over time, this study aimed to address this gap by asking them how they experienced parental separation in childhood, what it meant to them as a child and how they felt about it as they looked back now.

3 | Children's Perspectives on Positive Adjustment to Parental Separation

Drawing on international research since 2000, the study examined what is known about children's everyday experiences by reviewing studies that

- Were conducted with children and/or young adults who had experienced parental separation in childhood
- Investigated their own reported experiences of parental separation
- Focused on their everyday experience (Kay-Flowers 2019)

Seventeen studies from 10 countries met these criteria and were included in the review (Dunn and Deater-Deckard 2001; Butler et al. 2002; Wade and Smart 2002; Flowerdew and Neale 2003; Moxnes 2003; Hogan et al. 2003; Smith et al. 2003; Smart 2006; Bagshaw 2007; Campbell 2008; Halpenny et al. 2008; Menning 2008; Maes et al. 2011; Fortin et al. 2012; Du Plooy and Van Rensburg 2015; Brand et al. 2017; Morrison et al. 2017).

Themes identified from this review are outlined and discussed with reference to findings from a previous study by Birnbaum and Saini (2012) who reviewed studies of children who were involved in custody and access disputes. Examining 44 studies

across 13 countries, they asked how children are informed of parental separation, how their voices are heard to support their participation and what recommendations they would make to allow them to participate during parental disputes post-separation (Birnbaum and Saini 2012). The reviews had different foci, but similarities emerged in some of the themes; therefore, Birnbaum and Saini's findings (2012) are incorporated in the next section which reports key findings in children's positive adjustment to parental separation.

3.1 | Parental Communication

Children really valued good communication with their parents throughout the separation process. Most children were surprised by their parents' decision to separate, many were not informed prior to the separation and often were unaware of the reasons for their decision (Birnbaum and Saini 2012). Parents telling them what was happening and explaining events enabled children to develop some understanding of the changes taking place. Being told explicitly about the separation allowed it to be discussed and meant children could create 'an understandable story' (Maes et al. 2011, 272). Being able to talk about it several times, so their understanding deepened over time, was important (Maes et al. 2011). This provided opportunities for clarification and enabled parents to address children's fears (Birnbaum and Saini 2012).

3.2 | Children's Views

Children wanted to have their views taken into account in decision-making about post-separation arrangements. It made them feel 'appreciated and valued', provided reassurance and a sense of security (Smith et al. 2003, 207; Brand et al. 2017). However, while many thought they should be asked their opinion about arrangements and reported more positive experiences when their views were taken into account (Fortin et al. 2012), they did not want the burden of making the final decision, particularly in relation to residence (Butler et al. 2003). Children emphasized the importance of feeling 'that they matter to their parents' and were considered in the decisions parents made about their living arrangements (Maes et al. 2011, 274). Where parents continued to meet their child's needs and post-separation residential arrangements reflected the child's relationships with parents, it had a positive influence on a child's welfare (Birnbaum and Saini 2012).

3.3 | Continuity

The importance of continuity in their living arrangements was emphasized by children. Maintaining relationships with both parents was a key factor in children's adaptation, with those describing relationships that either did not change or improved after separation adapting well (Moxnes 2003; Hogan et al. 2003; Halpenny et al. 2008). Children appreciated being able to live in the same locality post-separation, so they could remain in the same school, maintain existing friendships and contact with their extended family (Moxnes 2003; Butler et al. 2003). School and extra-curricular activities were viewed positively, and

children highlighted the importance of talking to their friends (Birnbaum and Saini 2012).

3.4 | Support

Parental support was closely associated with the quality of parental communication. Where parents remained on reasonable terms, children felt comfortable in their relationships with both parents and found them useful sources of emotional support and advice (Butler et al. 2002; Hogan et al. 2003). Residential parents (usually mothers) were best placed to offer emotional support and comfort and played an important role in encouraging contact with the non-resident parent (Butler et al. 2002; Fortin et al. 2012; Brand et al. 2017). Grandparents were seen as key confidants and valuable sources of support (Butler et al. 2002; Dunn and Deater-Deckard 2001). Friends were often key confidants and were particularly important where support from parents was not forthcoming (Butler et al. 2003; Campbell 2008).

3.5 | Parental Conflict

The negative impact of parental conflict on children's social and emotional wellbeing was a consistent theme across the studies (Flowerdew and Neale 2003; Bagshaw 2007; Brand et al. 2017). Where this was restricted to the time parents were living together, separation often led to improved relationships, leading to children feeling more comfortable in their own homes and viewing 'the new family arrangements as preferable to those that existed before' (Hogan et al. 2003; Birnbaum and Saini 2012).

3.6 | Transitions

Children's adjustment to post-separation family transitions, in particular, the acquisition of step-parents, was influenced by the number of changes they experienced as well as the pace and timing of changes. It was beneficial to children if only one parent re-partnered at a time and changes did not coincide with other life events, such as starting school (Flowerdew and Neale 2003). Where the introduction of residential step-parents was gradual, children got to know the step-parent and feel comfortable with the relationship over time, providing the 'psychological travelling time' needed to accept this life change (Flowerdew and Neale 2003, 153; Butler et al. 2003; Hogan et al. 2003; Moxnes 2003).

3.7 | Looking Back

When children looked back on their parents' separation, most felt that 'things had worked out for the best', some thought 'their parents were happier and they felt that they themselves had become more grown-up ... or gained in self-confidence' (Kay-Flowers 2019, 37). Their experiences informed their views about adult relationships and how parents should raise their children (Smart 2006). As young adults, they often had a different perspective of their parents' separation and post-separation changes, many changing their interpretation of why

their non-resident parent did not maintain contact with them. While Fortin et al. (2012) found many changed their positive interpretation of this to a negative one, almost the same number changed in the opposite direction, leading to the suggestion that 'they had not necessarily acquired any greater understanding of past events, merely a different one' (330).

4 | Methods

Recognizing the potential value of young adults' accounts in understanding how they adjusted to post-separation changes over time, this study aimed to address the limited research in this area by asking them how they experienced parental separation in childhood, what it meant to them as a child and how they felt about it as they looked back now. In this way, it would gain an understanding of how they accommodated the changes that separation brought. This required the provision of a 'safe space' in which participants feel comfortable sharing their personal experiences (Lundy 2006). Recognizing my positionality, in particular, my age, role as an academic and as an experienced social worker, I believed I was not necessarily best placed to identify a 'safe space' in which young adults would feel able to talk openly and freely about their experiences. Therefore, I worked with a focus group of four young people (aged 16–18) to design the study and decide on the methodological approach. The group evolved through informal discussions with young people in a youth group to include those who had showed particular interest in the study. Having obtained parental consent for their involvement, a series of meetings took place that led to the following decisions:

1. The internet was the best place to conduct the research.
2. An online questionnaire would be devised. This provided participants with ease of access, control over the questions they answered and depth of responses, as well as anonymity, which focus group members saw as advantages over individual interviews.
3. A fictionalized case study of children's experiences of parental separation based on my professional experience would be written, which would be dramatized and filmed to provide a short video clip which became known as the Prompt Simulation Video (PSV). This would be linked to the questionnaire to engage the interest of potential participants.
4. Confirmation of my suggestion that the target audience might be the undergraduate students I taught because their knowledge of me and my research background meant they had trust in the researcher and the authenticity of this internet-based study.
5. The best way of promoting the study to the target audience and ensuring their anonymity was by posting the questionnaire and PSV on the YouTube site and sharing the URL link with potential participants.

4.1 | Research Design

These decisions meant specific new research tools needed to be created. As the researcher, I was responsible for constructing these

research tools and drew on previous experience of constructing questionnaires and writing case studies. However, constructing the PSV was a creative process requiring recruitment of individuals with appropriate skills and work with them to dramatize and film the case study. Once these individuals were identified, we started weaving together different resources, each of us bringing specific skills to the task, combining and adapting the methods and techniques we used. In this way, we took on the role of ‘professional do-it-yourself[er]s’, to co-construct the new tools (Denzin and Lincoln 2011, 4). Leading co-creation of the PSV, I was involved in constant dialogue, on-going review and clear articulation of decisions across the team.

Drawing on key themes from the review, the online questionnaire investigated children’s lived experience of parental separation, what it meant to them at the time and how they felt about it now. The final version was shared with focus group members to check the questionnaire format was easy to navigate, that the questions were understood in the way that was intended and to gauge how long it would take to complete.

Drawing on my professional experience, I wrote a fictionalized case study of three siblings (aged 14, 12 and 11) who had different views and responses to their parents’ separation. I approached the Drama department in the university to ask for undergraduate volunteers who would be willing to dramatize the case study and create the PSV; three volunteers were recruited. Together with a focus group member, who was now studying Film at the university, these volunteers became the group of young adults who co-created the research tools. Working with me, they were responsible for dramatizing the case study, filming, editing and uploading the PSV to YouTube with a link to the online questionnaire.

This study was part of my doctoral studies at the University of Sheffield. Ethical approval for the study was sought from the Ethics Committee at the University as well as from the university in the northwest of England where the study was carried out (to protect student identity in line with ethical guidelines, this has not been identified) and granted.

4.2 | Participants

The target audience was young adults (aged 18–30) who had experienced parental separation in childhood. I targeted students on the undergraduate programmes that I taught, who had knowledge of me and my work and therefore had confidence in the authenticity of the study. By uploading the PSV to YouTube, attaching the online questionnaire and sharing the weblink in taught sessions, students could access the study on their own devices in their own time and were not using university networks. This meant participant anonymity was assured. As an additional precaution, I decided not to ask participants to identify their ethnicity because this characteristic alongside their age and gender may have led to them being identifiable from the population data.

The study was advertised to all first-, second- and third-year students on the programmes (total number = 320) with a request that if they had experienced parental separation in childhood, they consider taking part by watching the PSV and completing the

questionnaire. They were advised of support services, within the university and outside, such as Samaritans, should they experience any distress having taken part in the study. The wider study findings drew on the experiences of 30 young adults aged 18–30 who experienced parental separation in childhood and were studying in higher education. Twenty-five were female and five were male, which reflected the gender balance across the cohort. This paper focuses specifically on the 20 young adults whose accounts showed a high level of accommodation of parental separation.

4.3 | Analysis

The study aimed to give ‘voice’ to young adults’ childhood experiences of parental separation by asking what it meant to them as children, and how they felt about it as they looked back now, to understand how children ‘accommodated’ post-separation changes over time. The questionnaire yielded their accounts that were subjected to a process of content analysis (Halling 2008) involving the following three stages:

1. Careful reading of individual accounts so that their lived experience could be viewed in its entirety and emergent themes noted
2. Importing the following external frameworks to provide lenses to interpret respondents’ lived experiences:
 - i. Emergent themes from the literature review
 - ii. Insights from my professional experience to test out interpretation of data

Question 15, which asked how they felt now about the changes that had taken place, became the central focus. Responses to this question were categorized according to, first, the level of satisfaction shown, meaning whether they felt their wishes, expectations or needs had been met and, second, the level of acceptance shown, meaning whether they viewed the process as adequate, valid or suitable (Kay-Flowers 2019). Each level was sub-divided into high, medium or low levels. The focus here is on those who showed a high level of accommodation; therefore, it will only record how these accounts were categorized.

Accounts that indicated the separation had been a positive improvement in their life, sometimes with occasional reservations, were categorized as showing a high level of satisfaction. Those that indicated full acceptance of the post-separation changes, occasionally with a little hesitancy, were categorized as showing a high level of acceptance. Most accounts showed continuity across the levels. Combining these categories showed the extent to which young adults had adjusted to or ‘accommodated’ their parents’ separation and post-separation changes and whether they had ‘accommodated’ them well or whether they had struggled (Kay-Flowers 2019). Accounts were categorized as having a high level of accommodation where young adults saw their parents’ separation as a positive improvement in their lives and fully accepted the post-separation changes.

Thirty respondents’ accounts were categorized, 20 showed a high level of accommodation, 6 showed a medium level and 4 showed a low level. Once categorized, the second stage of analysis took place in which, first, themes from the literature review and then, second,

insights from my professional experiences were used as lenses to interpret the data, enabling experiences and factors influencing children's accommodation to be identified. This process involved a 'dialectical dance' moving between 'abstraction' in which themes were drawn from the data and 'experience' in which research literature and my professional experience were used to interpret the data and extrapolate meaning from accounts (Finlay 2009). The key themes that emerged were children and parents' responses to parental separation and changes; the availability of support and opportunity to talk to someone about the separation; quality of parental communication and whether their views were taken into consideration in post-separation arrangements; and the experience of parental conflict (Kay-Flowers 2019).

5 | Findings

This paper focuses solely on the accounts of the 20 young adults who showed a high level of accommodation of parental separation. These respondents were aged 18–27 at the time of the study; 17 were female, and three were male, suggesting that male voices may not be heard so clearly. When their parents separated, five were aged 0–4 years, four were aged 5–8, eight were aged 9–12 and three were aged 13–16. The minimum time that had elapsed since their parents separated varied from 3 to 19 years; most respondents (16) experienced it more than 7 years ago, and four said it occurred within the last 3–6 years (see Figure 1).

Following analysis of the data and writing up of the findings, I decided to report the main study findings in the form of a framework in which the key factors that influenced children's accommodation of parental separation over time were identified. Its aim was to ensure children's voices about their childhood experiences of parental separation were heard and to provide a tool that would support adults to empower children in coping with their parents' separation. The 'framework for understanding children's accommodation of parental separation' (here on referred to as 'the framework') was designed as an accessible resource making the findings available to a wide audience of practitioners, parents, academics, researchers and policy makers

(see Appendix 1). It is an online resource available from Bristol University Policy Press website (Appendix Six in colour).

The framework identifies the key factors associated with different levels of accommodation that emerged from young adults' accounts of their parents' separation (Kay-Flowers 2019a). Those associated with a high level of accommodation are represented in the green section of the framework, which has been extracted and can be found in Figure 2. The key themes—conflict, communication, support/talking and reactions—are identified along the axis, with the factors associated with a high level of accommodation in each theme described in the arcs. They will be considered in the context of empowering children in coping with their parents' separation through family life practices, children's own actions and the role of practitioners in the following section.

6 | Empowering Children—Family Life Practices

6.1 | End to Parental Conflict

A dominant theme in empowering children in coping with their parents' separation was an end to parental conflict (see inner arc). Sometimes, this occurred as soon as one parent left the family home; in other families, parents needed to decide on living arrangements and contact arrangements first, meaning it took some time for parents to reach this point. Seven respondents referred to parental conflict in their accounts, describing its impact at the time and the sense of relief they felt when it came to an end.

Two female respondents referred to domestic violence between their parents. They described being frightened, scared or fearful when their parents lived together. One (Respondent 21) explained how she felt 'happier' and 'stopped being frightened at home' when her parents separated. She believed her mother knew she was 'getting scared and this made her leave Dad' (aged 9–12 at time of separation). Another (Respondent 10) described how her father 'was aggressive and violent' at home and how his

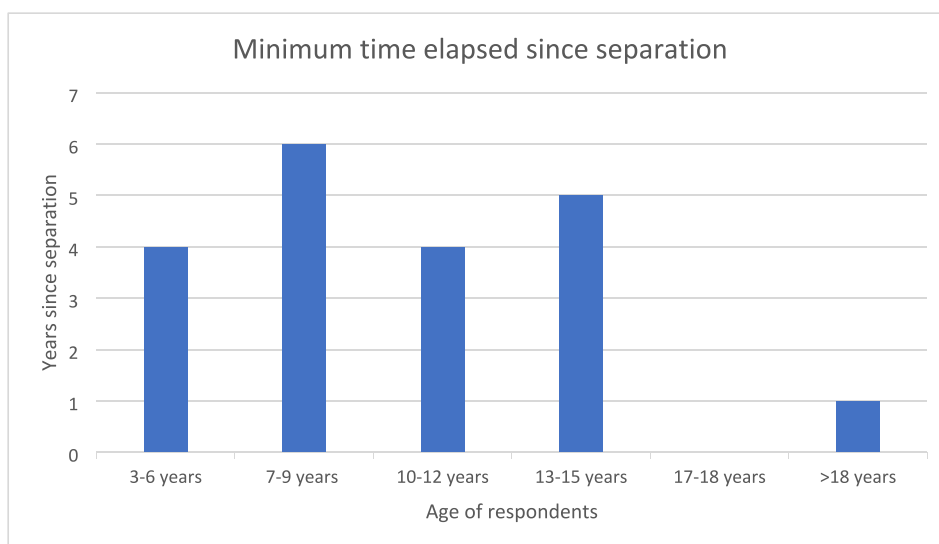


FIGURE 1 | The minimum time that has elapsed since their parents' separation.

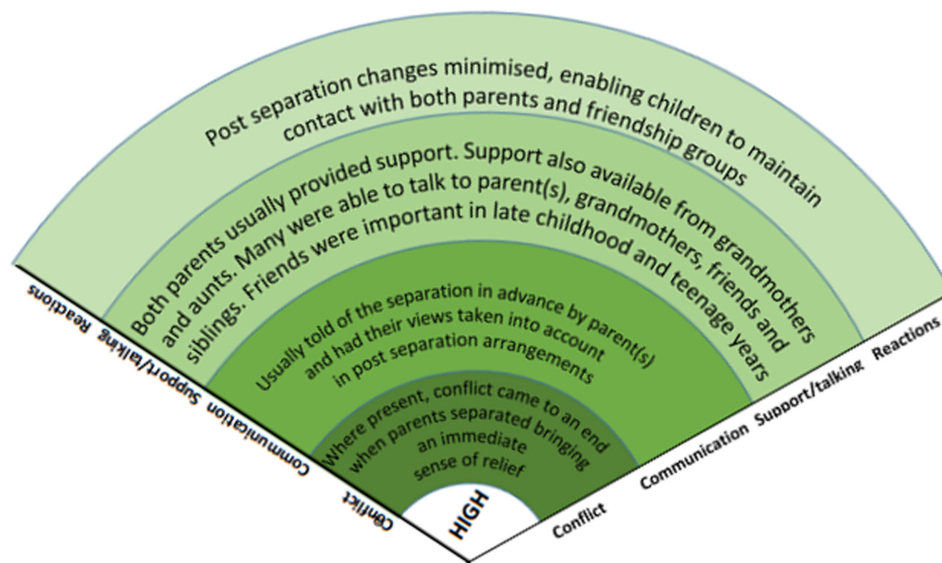


FIGURE 2 | High level of accommodation sector—extracted from Kay-Flowers (2019).

departure from the home was ‘a relief’ that made her feel ‘more relaxed’ (aged 9–12 at time of separation).

Four respondents identified parental conflict as specific to the time around separation that came to an end once post-separation arrangements were put in place. They described the impact of being drawn into their parents’ arguments about post-separation living arrangements initially. One (Respondent 19) described how her parents ‘argued a lot and involved me at first until they saw it was upsetting me because I cried a lot’ (aged 13–16 at time of separation). Another (Respondent 9) described the burden of being an only child and drawn into her parents’ arguments, being used to relay messages between them. Finding the situation very difficult, she told her aunt, who spoke to her mother who then spoke to her father and ‘they both stopped’ (aged 13–16 at time of separation). Others described the impact of parental conflict on their health. One (Respondent 11) explained how her ‘anxiety levels’ increased ‘to the point of having panic attacks’ (aged 9–12 at time of separation). Another (Respondent 31) said she ‘was so upset and anxious that [she] developed an eating disorder It was so bad that I even thought about taking my own life’ (aged 9–12 at time of separation). However, over time, parental communication improved, and arrangements were put in place bringing the conflict to an end and enabling her to maintain her friendship group, leading to a much more positive view of the separation. In these two cases, their parents’ separation coincided with their transition from primary to high school and the introduction of a residential stepfather, indicating that they faced a significant number of changes in a short period of time.

Sometimes, it took a while for post-separation arrangements to be put in place which meant ‘it was nice not to have all the rows and uncomfortable silences it was unsettling because everything was different, where we went, who we saw and where we saw them. It was confusing having to live between two homes and my dad had a new girlfriend, so we had to get used to her’ (Respondent 25 aged 5–8 at time of separation). As the eldest child she felt responsible for her brother, ‘when I think back I

was very stressed and I was upset easily and started to pull my hair out which became a habit’.

6.2 | Parental Communication

Respondents emphasized the importance of effective parental communication (see second arc) in supporting them in accommodating their parents’ separation. This was seen in the way they learned about the separation and whether they believed their views had been taken into account in post-separation arrangements.

Almost half (9) of the young adults were told about their parents’ separation in advance. This meant they were informed of the changes that were going to take place and were able to ask questions, seek clarification and were able to prepare. Some described their initial reactions, often reflecting their age at the time. One (Respondent 23 aged 5–8 at the time) explained how she felt ‘upset and scared because I was only young, so did not fully understand why they were separating’. While another (Respondent 9), whose parents had separated previously was aged 13–16 at the time said she ‘knew it was coming so I wasn’t surprised. They’d separated twice before so I kind of knew what to expect. I was still upset though because I thought, “This time it’s actually happening and they’re never getting back together again”’.

Their experiences were in stark contrast to the confusion and emotional turmoil created for those who learned of their parents’ separation only at the time of one parent leaving, such as Respondent 25, who described hating ‘my mum for making my dad leave’ (aged 5–8 at time of separation).

Half (10) of the young adults said their views had been taken into account by their parents in post-separation arrangements. Two (Respondents 3 and 25) aged 9–12 at the time had direct discussions with their parents about who they wanted to live with. Most said they had not spoken directly but believed their views had been considered because of decisions their parents made.

They felt their views were respected in decisions about where they lived and attended school, enabling them to stay in contact with friends (Respondents 9, 11 and 19). Two (Respondents 10 and 21) believed their views were taken into account in their mother's decision to leave their father (see above). Each of these respondents maintained contact with their non-resident parent after separation, which was what they wanted.

6.3 | Support

These children felt supported during and post-separation (see third arc). Most identified both parents as providing support, half (10) believed this was demonstrated by their views being taken into consideration in the decisions their parents made about post-separation arrangements, particularly where they lived, went to school and when they had contact.

Post-separation, they were in contact with both parents and through them with their extended family. In this way, they had access to and were able to derive support from an extensive family network. Respondents identified grandmothers and aunts as important sources of support. Most found this support network sufficient.

6.4 | Talking

Most of the children had talked to someone in their family (see third arc) about their parents' separation. In more than half the cases, they talked to their parent(s), which enabled them to ask questions, to seek clarity on their understandings, all of which contributed to a level of preparedness and reduced their anxiety. It also illustrated how over time, their parents had been able to talk to each other and support their children's ability to move between homes and school with ease (Kay-Flowers 2020).

Many of these children had been able to talk to grandmothers and siblings about what was happening in their family. Some had spoken to aunts and uncles, and many had talked to friends. Some had spoken to other people outside their family; three (Respondents 8, 26 and 29) identified a 'trusted adult' outside the family who was already known to them in whom to confide. They chose youth workers, a youth club leader and a work supervisor to talk to.

A few indicated they had not spoken to anyone outside their family but would have welcomed this opportunity. One respondent (23) said she would have welcomed further information about parental separation through Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE) lessons in school.

Others suggested it would have been helpful to talk to others who could have provided a longer-term perspective on parental separation and how their family situation could improve over time. Respondents referred to how it would have been useful to know 'things could get better if they split up' (Respondent 10 aged 9–12 at time of separation), another said 'It would have been good to talk to other children ... so that they could tell me how things could improve' (Respondent 21 aged 9–12 at time of separation).

6.5 | Parental Responses to Separation

Respondents highlighted how when parents minimized the changes that took place post-separation (see 'reactions' in outer arc), in terms of them being able to see each parent, continuing to live in the same house or nearby so that they could remain at the same school and therefore maintain their friendship group, they felt well supported. This enabled them to adjust to their new family situation and accommodate the changes more readily.

7 | Empowering Children—Children's Own Actions

7.1 | Friends

They described how remaining part of the same friendship groups was very important to them in coping with their parents' separation (see outer arc). Continuing to attend the same school provided this opportunity, allowing children to confide in friends about what was happening in their family and derive support in adjusting to the changes that were taking place (see third arc). This was particularly important for children in late childhood (9–12 years) and teenage years. Seven respondents had spoken to their friends about their parents' separation, one explaining 'Friends were really important to me and I didn't want to leave them I was given the chance to see a counsellor but didn't want to. I had a good support network of friends and youth group that helped me through' (Respondent 9, aged 13–16 at time of separation).

7.2 | Professionals

Some children sought out a 'trusted adult' in whom they could confide. Three respondents described how they chose to talk to a youth worker about their parents' separation. Two (Respondents 8 and 26) were also able to talk to their parents and had support from their extended family. The other (Respondent 29), a teenager at the time, also identified his work supervisor alongside his mother and sisters as sources of support. These accounts emphasized the importance of self-determination in choosing who to discuss their parents' separation with and illustrated the value of being able to talk to someone outside the family who may be able to provide an alternative, more objective, perspective on the changes taking place within it.

One (Respondent 7) aged 0–4 years when her parents separated described the issues she faced at the time with her mother's new partner, with whom they lived, getting drunk and causing trouble when he came home late. She explained that she had spoken to a counsellor during her childhood but did not identify who had arranged this intervention, how old she was at the time or what her views were on the value of the intervention.

8 | Empowering Children—Support From Practitioners

Practitioners working with children will often work with children who are coping with their parents' separation or the changes that have taken place as a result. They work in many

different settings and locations, with their roles falling within or transcending the education and social care fields.

The focus here has been on young adults who have a high level of accommodation of parental separation, most of whom identified their parents as sources of support, were able to talk to them about the separation and found this support network sufficient. However, two (Respondents 11 and 31) for whom parental separation coincided with their transition to secondary school and who experienced parental conflict alongside the introduction of a residential stepfather identified very high levels of anxiety leading to health issues and said, on reflection, they would have liked the opportunity to speak to someone outside the family.

It would have been good to have more help with this, maybe from the GP.

(Respondent 11, aged 9–12 at time of separation)

In those days eating disorders were not talked about quite so much and I think someone could have helped me get support more quickly. It was the worst time of my life.

(Respondent 31, aged 9–12 at time of separation)

The role of peer support in empowering children in accommodating parental separation was emphasized by two (Respondents 10 and 21).

It would have helped if someone had told me that things could get better if they split up.

(Respondent 10 aged 9–12 at the time of separation)

It would have been good to talk to other children who had seen their parents fighting at home so that they could tell me how things could improve.

(Respondent 21 aged 9–12 at the time of separation)

While one (Respondent 23) would have welcomed further information:

It would have been good to have some information, maybe in PSHE at school, but I might have been too young to take much in.

(Aged 5–8 at the time)

9 | Discussion

The framework identifies the factors respondents associated with supporting them in accommodating parental separation well. While each factor increased children's ability to cope with their parents' separation, the more factors that were present, the more empowered they were. Where all factors were present, they intersected and combined to provide the highest level of support for children's adjustment and accommodation of parental separation over time.

In line with previous studies, respondents described the impact of seeing and hearing their parents' arguments, or in some

cases witnessing domestic violence and explained the detrimental effect on their mental and physical health (Flowerdew and Neale 2003; Bagshaw 2007; Brand et al. 2017). The relief they felt when conflict came to an end was palpable; they felt more comfortable at home and saw the new family arrangements as an improvement on previous arrangements (Hogan et al. 2003; Birnbaum and Saini 2012). In some instances, conflict came to an end when a parent moved out of the home; in others, it only ended when post-separation arrangements were decided, but, in all cases, where it came to an end, respondents went on to accommodate their parents' separation well.

While good communication with their parents was highly valued by respondents, it was interpreted in different ways. Many respondents were told about their parents' separation in advance which set the scene for honest dialogue and open communication at the outset, which was highly valued (Bagshaw 2007). Those whose parents separated a long time ago or were very young at the time may have hazy recall of explanation and events, emphasizing the need for reiteration and repetition of facts for younger children (Butler et al. 2002; Maes et al. 2011). Half the respondents recognized their views had been taken into account in the decisions their parents took about post-separation arrangements, particularly where they lived, went to school and contact arrangements. Across the group, specific conversations about these issues were rare, but respondents felt the decisions their parents made demonstrated they 'mattered' to their parents, which was important in their adjustment (Maes et al. 2011).

All of the respondents maintained contact with their non-resident parent post-separation and therefore benefited from relationships with both parents, gaining emotional support from each, which aided and supported their adjustment as highlighted in previous studies (Butler et al. 2002; Moxnes 2003; Hogan et al. 2003; Halpenny et al. 2008; Birnbaum and Saini 2012). In addition, many maintained contact with their extended family and were able to tap into support there. They highlighted the value of being able to talk to grandmothers, aunts and sometimes siblings about what was happening in the family. Grandparents were seen as particularly useful because they had more distance and were able to bring a different perspective to the situation (Dunn and Deater-Deckard 2001). Outside the family, many respondents talked to friends and, as in other studies, highlighted the importance of peer support in adjusting to their parents' separation (Butler et al. 2003; Hogan et al. 2003; Halpenny et al. 2008). This was particularly important for children in late childhood and their teenage years.

While many children experienced a level of continuity in post-separation changes, some faced many changes in a short period of time. As Flowerdew and Neale (2003) found, the number and pace of changes created difficulties in their adjustment in the short term. They explained how they were able to speak to their siblings and friends, which supported their adjustment; nonetheless, they thought having the opportunity to talk to someone outside the family may have been beneficial at the time, particularly in enabling them to access outside support at an earlier stage. They would have liked more information about parental separation and saw schools as offering such opportunities. This may have been partially addressed by subsequent reforms with the introduction of Relationships Education (RE) in Primary

Schools (age 4–11 years) and Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in Secondary Schools (age 11–16/18 years) in English state schools (DfE 2021a, 2021b).

9.1 | Limitations

This paper reports the findings from 20 respondents' accounts, 17 of whom were female, three were male, which reflects the cohort composition but meaning that, while represented, male voices are limited. The decision not to ask respondents about their ethnicity, in order to preserve their anonymity, means this dimension of young adults' experiences is absent. The study used a PSV that dramatized a case study scenario featuring domestic violence. While no questions were asked about the presence of parental conflict in the questionnaire, seven respondents referred to it. This may have been influenced by the case study, and using a different case study may have brought about different results. These are limitations in this study and are areas for consideration in future research designs.

Respondents provided retrospective accounts of childhood experiences, relying on their recollection of past experiences and events, which, given the passage of time, may be disjointed, particularly if they were very young at the time. It may also be the case, as Fortin et al. (2012) suggest, that young adults' perspectives and interpretations of events may have changed with the passage of time.

The motivations of those who chose to participate in this study are unknown. This paper focuses on the experiences of those who saw their parents' separation as a positive improvement in their lives and fully accepted the post-separation changes and therefore had a high level of accommodation, which may suggest participants wanted 'to communicate their positive feelings about their families' (Smart et al. 2001, 182). But not all participants within the wider study had similar experiences; six accounts showed a medium level of accommodation, while four showed a low level with indications that their experiences continued to impact negatively on their adult lives today. These participants may have seen taking part 'as an opportunity to talk through their problems' (Smart et al. 2001 182). Alternatively, they may have seen sharing their experiences as a way of assisting the researcher and through this helping other children and adults experiencing parental separation (Butler et al. 2003).

9.2 | Future Directions

The framework is a tool for developing adults' awareness of children's experiences of parental separation which can be used by parents on their own or by practitioners working with families to frame discussions. Heightening parental awareness of children's experiences can inform their decision-making and actions, encouraging the adoption of a more child-centred approach (Kay-Flowers 2019a). It has generated much interest and positive feedback during presentations but its use in social work practice has yet to be tested. The framework's usefulness to children is restricted because of the inaccessibility of the language used. Therefore, a child friendly version — 'The Wheel' — has been produced as part of a resource pack for supporting children in coping

with separation by encouraging them to take actions of their own to help them in accommodating the changes their parents' separation brings (Kay-Flowers Consultancy 2021). For use with small groups or individually, its usefulness has yet to be tested and evaluated in a group setting.

10 | Conclusion

The accounts of these young adults who experienced parental separation in childhood and accommodated the changes well deepen understandings of children's lived experience and the factors that support their adjustment over time. Each of these factors, important in their own right, were beneficial in children's accommodation of parental separation. When combined, they intersected in a way that cumulatively strengthened children's situation and resilience. Where children talked to their parents about the separation, they were able to make sense of the changes and their place within them, they recognized they mattered and felt reassured and supported. These actions, in the hands of adults, illustrate how empowering they are for children coping with their parents' separation.

However, not all children felt able to talk to their parents, and where this was the case, they often sought trusted adults within and outside their family in whom to confide. Self-determination was important; these were people with whom they already had a trusting relationship, with the opportunities for those working in educational settings evident. Alongside their friends, they played a significant role in building children's resilience, empowering them in coping with their parents' separation.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

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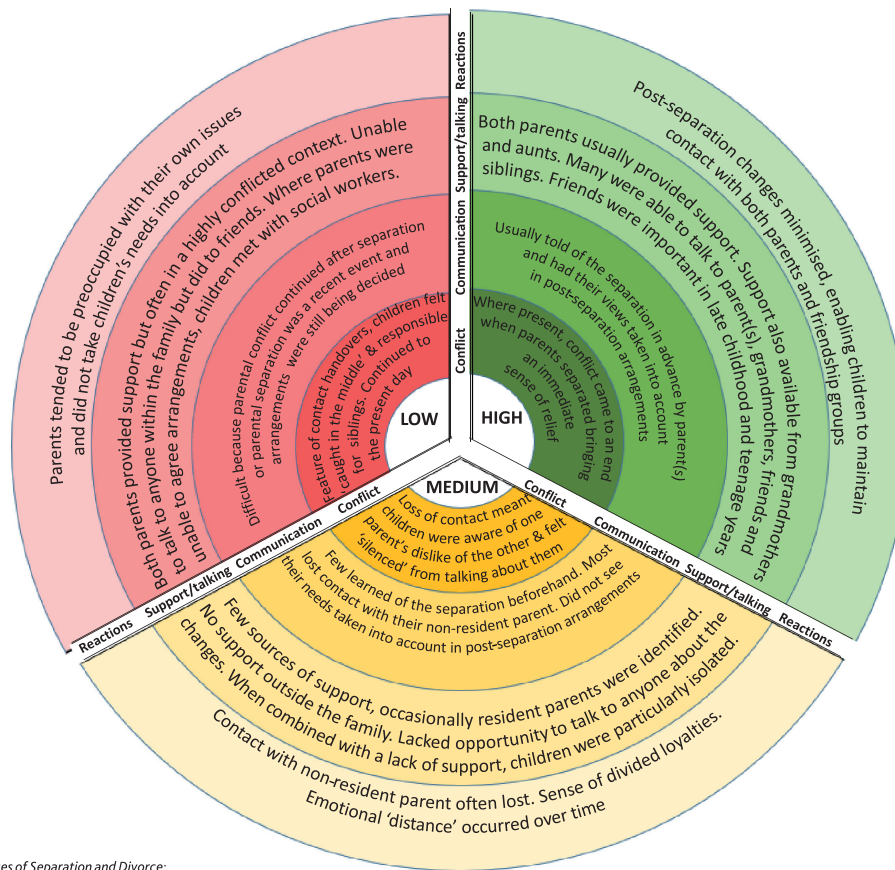
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Appendix 1

Reproduced from Kay-Flowers (2019).

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