Children's Perspectives on Coping and Support Following Parental Separation

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Children's Perspectives on Coping and Support Following Parental Separation

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Abstract

Increasingly, children experience ongoing change in family formation and structure and such fluctuation may threaten or diminish children's feelings of security with regard to established family roles, relationships and routines. A number of studies have explored available support for children in the context of family transition, focusing in particular upon those organisations providing services to children and families. However, in order to gain more precise insight into the mechanisms through which children can best be supported, it is necessary to consult children themselves and to elicit their perspectives and responses to the changes in their family contexts. A primary aim of the present study, therefore, is to gain an understanding of children's strategies for coping with parental separation, and the sources of support that they find most helpful in order to adjust to these changes. Sixty children, in two age groups (8-11 representing middle childhood and 14-17 representing adolescence) participated in the study. A qualitative approach was adopted with semi-structured interviews exploring children's perspectives on the role played by different types of support, both informal (family, friends) and formal (counselling/peer support services, school). Key findings in the present study highlight the importance for children of being selective about whom they seek and accept support from, with the family being the preferred source of support for the majority of children. The study also highlights the need to provide a broad range of services in outside agencies in a non-stigmatising way and at various stages throughout the separation process.

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Introduction

Child Development research has come to place greater emphasis on the social context of childhood, and, in particular, on children's development within the family. For many children, part of this experience of development within the family context will involve living with the breakdown of the parental relationship and the consequent separation or divorce of parents with whom they have lived since birth. Transitions related to divorce and parental separation typically involve possible loss of contact or diminished contact with one parent and the potential for reduced parental availability and responsiveness, in addition to many other psychological and emotional stressors, such as moving between two households, adjusting to new family routines, and possibly dealing with ongoing parental anger and inter-parental conflict (Kelly & Emery, 2003). Children's adjustment to parental separation is, therefore, an ongoing process, with the potential for established patterns in relationships and routines to be challenged at various points in time throughout this process.

In order to respond effectively to the needs of children when parents are separating, it is useful to consider the socio-cultural contexts in which parental separation occurs. While much research has been carried out to explore the psychological effects of parental separation on children's lives, most of the available information comes from studies carried out in the UK and the US. In the following section some contextual details are provided, relating to the legislative and policy context in which parental separation and divorce have evolved in the Irish Republic, and the numbers of families affected by parental separation.

Research Context

Cultural norms, Irish family law and the Roman Catholic Church have had a profound influence on parental separation and divorce in an Irish context, which distinguishes Ireland from other European countries and the US. Of most immediate relevance, perhaps, is the fact

that divorce was not voted in by Irish society until relatively recently, in 1996. Yet, by 1996 births outside marriage made up a quarter of all births in Ireland and lone parents (including separated and divorced parents) headed one in five families (O'Connor, 1998). Over the last decade the Republic of Ireland has continued to experience a growth in the variation of family forms and according to the latest Census of Population in 2006, fewer than one in five households in Dublin City are now made up of the traditional family of husband, wife and children, and this decline in traditional family households is also reflected nationwide, although less dramatically so (CSO, 2007). With regard to the number of families experiencing separation and divorce, between 1986 and 1996, the numbers of separated persons doubled from 37,200 in 1986 to 87,800 in 1996 (Fahey & Russell, 2001). Between 1996 and 2002, this number (including divorced) increased by over a half. However, within the overall separated category, the number of persons recorded as divorced more than trebled, from 9,800 to 35,100 between 1996 and 2002, reflecting perhaps the legalisation of divorce in 1997 in Ireland.

Overall, the national average for marriage breakdown in Ireland is estimated to be at 13%, and this rate increases to almost 20% in cities such as Dublin and Limerick (Iona Institute, 2007). Moreover, cohabitation has risen sixfold over the past decade, from 31,298 people in 1996 to 189,240 in 2006, making it the fastest-growing family unit (Iona Institute, 2007). While married couples accounted for 80% of family units in 1996, this has since fallen to 70% in 2006. Meanwhile, the number of lone parents is up 80% since 1986, with 190,000 lone parents now resident in the country.

In 1995 the Commission on the Family was established by the Minister for Social Welfare "to examine the effects of legislation and policies on families and make recommendations to the Government on proposals which would strengthen the capacity of families to carry out their functions in a changing economic and social environment" (pp 2). Arising from these recommendations, the Family Support Agency was established in 2003 with the objectives of

promoting continuity and stability in family life, fostering a supportive community environment for families at local level, and supporting families in the context of family transition through, for example, the provision of family mediation services. It also undertakes research, and provides and disseminates information about parenting and family issues. The establishment of the Office of the Minister for Children in 2005 has further generated possibilities for greater coherence in policy-making for children and their families. A primary objective of the OMC is to improve the lives of children under the National Children's Strategy and to give children a stronger voice on issues that affect them.

Researchers and policy-makers have emphasised the importance of the child's perspective on parental separation and family change. Yet, despite significant transformations in family life in Irish society, little research has been carried out to explore how children adapt to these changes. Insight into children's perspectives on their family transitions is, therefore, invaluable in light of the increasing numbers of separated parents in Ireland and the relatively recent introduction of divorce. Parental separation for children often represents their first experience of transition in close relationships. In Ireland, up to very recently, this transition has provided few established or visible co-ordinates for children to refer to and be guided by.

Support Services for Children in Families Experiencing Parental Separation

A large body of research has attempted to identify key issues in the provision of effective support for children in families experiencing parental separation (Fawcett, 2000; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001; Smart et al, 2001; Rodgers & Pryor, 1998). A relatively recent review of services aimed at supporting children through family transition (Hawthorne, Jessop, Pryor & Richards, 2003) suggested that of particular importance were the needs to: facilitate communication between children and their parents, help children to understand what is happening, and facilitate children's networks for support, including maintaining school and community links. Adopting a systems approach to include the family system and the broader

social and legal systems in planning interventions with children and families in transition has also been emphasised (Kelly, 2002). Kelly and Emery (2003) state that services should be tailored to meet the individual needs of each child and prioritise a number of key issues in terms of effective interventions for children and families experiencing family transition. Such issues include: the promotion of close relationships between children and both parents, enhancing economic stability in post-separation families, curbing ongoing inter-parental conflict and, where appropriate, involving children in interventions that enable them to have a voice in decisions and arrangements pertaining to contact with parents.

Few studies have focused upon children's own perspectives on how they can be supported effectively following parental separation. Fawcett (2000) draws attention to the fact that the majority of support services in the UK have been adult-focused and that child-centred services are typically not prioritised until excesses of behaviour bring children to the attention of social workers or child guidance clinics. As argued by Hawthorne et al (2003), although researchers and service providers continue to emphasise children's right to be involved in decisions that concern them and argue that children have the capacity to act as agents in their own lives, in reality few support services manage successfully to incorporate these ideals into current provision.

Children's perspectives on parental separation

Greene & Hill (2005) highlight a number of shortcomings in empirical research on children to date. These include a predominant emphasis on children as objects rather than as subjects of research studies, on findings which describe outcomes rather than processes in children's lives and on research which prioritises variables rather than persons. Hogan (2005) reflects on the absence of emphasis within the field of Developmental Psychology on understanding children's subjective experiences – children's ordinary lives and their active participation in their social worlds. The author concludes that a developmental perspective on children's

experience within psychological research is both possible and desirable and requires compiling appropriate research questions and creating and shaping effective methodological tools with which to explore these questions.

As previously mentioned, to date much of the research into the psychological effects of parental separation has been carried out in the US and the UK. The value of many of these studies lies in their ability to point us in the direction of the most significant challenges which children are faced with when the structure of their family life is altered dramatically by parental separation. However, many of these studies have relied exclusively upon adult views on children's experiences of parental separation. More recently, there is increasing emphasis on the need to examine more critically some of the assumptions which exist about children's competence and their ability to adjust to their family lives following parental separation (Smith & Gallop, 2001; Butler et al, 2003; Smart, Neale & Wade, 2001).

Similarly, Robinson et al (2003) suggest that children do not witness their parents' divorce passively but are involved, creative and resourceful participants. Cashmore (2003) summarises three key messages which have emerged from research on children's views and perspectives on their parents' separation. First of all, children generally wish to be kept informed with regard to what is happening in their changing family context. However, children are often kept unaware of such details by parents who may wish to protect children from distress and anxiety (Dunn & Deater Deckard, 2001; Gollop, Taylor & Smith, 2000). Secondly, children wish to be included in some aspects of decision-making post-separation and to have their views and perspectives taken into account (Gollop et al, 2000; Neale & Smart, 1998). Significantly, a clear distinction is drawn between the desire to be included in certain aspects of the decision-making process and the burden of feeling obliged to take decisions which may cause distress or discomfort to the child. The third message highlighted is children's expressed desire to have workable and flexible arrangements in their contact with parents post-separation. Flexibility in arrangements is emphasised particularly in the

context of children getting older and adapting to changing needs and interests (Smart et al, 2001). Researchers in Australia and New Zealand also emphasise the need to place children at the centre of research on their experiences of the process of separation and divorce (Parkinson, Cashmore & Single, 2005; Taylor, 2005). Rather than allowing the debate to be dominated by the voices of adults, these authors draw attention to the fact that children are likely to be more satisfied with post-separation decisions when they have been kept informed about unfolding in an appropriate manner and consulted where possible about decisions significant to their wellbeing. Other researchers have suggested that these trends extend beyond the family unit and into family law processes, as seen in the adversarial system where children have become 'the silent majority', without voice, despite a 'best interests' principle (Shea Hart, 2003, p. 31).

Methods

The study was carried out in the Republic of Ireland and adopted a qualitative, child-centred approach to children's experiences of parental separation. For the purposes of the present study, parental separation was defined as the point at which parents establish separate accommodation. The sample consisted of 60 children ranging in age from 8 to 17 years, most of whom had experienced the separation of their parents during the last 5 years. The sample was identified and accessed through a range of sources, including school principals, guidance counsellors, home-school liaison teachers and services involved in providing support to children and their families. Contact was made with families once a 'gatekeeper' such as a home-school liaison teacher or counsellor had obtained their consent to being contacted by the study team. When children indicated their willingness to participate in the study, consent was sought from their resident parents.

Approximately two-thirds of the children had at one time received support through a formal service provider and, in most cases, these were services specialising in issues of parental

separation. Most of the children lived in and around the Dublin area, with a small number living in towns outside of Dublin and one in the West of Ireland. The sample, therefore, is not a representative sample of children whose parents have separated, and the findings must be considered in light of this. It may be that children whose parents believed them to be coping well were more likely to agree to their children's participation. It may also be the case that those children who have been in contact with a formal support service are better able to reflect on their experiences of parental separation, and this may contribute to a more positive response to the research process. Since we do not have information about potential participants who were not contacted about the study, or who did not volunteer to participate, it is not possible to identify such possible sources of bias in the sample obtained. The study is of an exploratory nature, and future studies should be based on random sampling to allow for generalisability of findings. The present study can, however, help to shed light on the experiences and needs of children whose parents separate, and highlight future specific research needs on this topic.

Children were encouraged to develop narratives about their experience of the events and interactions, the feelings and understanding that comprised their experience of the separation process. Semi-structured interviews were used focusing on children's perceptions of the following domains: narratives of the separation process; practical consequences of the separation; children's understanding of the separation and it's implications for family life, children's responses to and feelings about the separation, and children's experiences of coping and support, both formal and informal. Younger children were invited to draw a picture of their family while older children completed a Family Links Map (adapted from Teen Between Workbook) as supplementary research tools.

The sample consisted of 60 children in two age groups: 8-11 and 13-17 years. The sample was created in this way to allow some comparison to be drawn between children in middle

childhood and those in adolescence. There were 30 children in the younger age group (8-11) and 30 children in the older age group (13-17 years). The study included 36 girls (60%) and 24 boys (40%). The majority of the children had experienced their parents' separation within the previous 5 years but the range was approximately 1 to 13 years. Approximately two thirds of the children had at one time received support through a formal support service provider and, in most cases, these were services specialising in issues of parental separation.

Findings

A primary aim of the study was to gain insight into and further our understanding of children's strategies for coping with parental separation, and the sources of support that they found most helpful in doing so. In the following sections we examine children's perspectives on the benefits of attending formal support services when parents are separating, children's perspectives on barriers to seeking and accepting help from formal support services and, more generally, children's own views on their experiences of coping and support.

Perceived Benefits of Attending Formal Support Services

Forty children in the sample (67%) had at some time received support from a formal service in connection with their parents' separation and 33 children (55%) were currently attending services. In addition, three children had been in contact with the school guidance counsellor to talk about their parents' separation. Eleven of the children had received counselling on a one-to-one basis, outside of school. For the majority of these children, services were perceived as being among the most important sources of support. Key factors associated with positive perceptions of support services included facilitating greater understanding of the separation process, opportunities for sharing experiences with others in the context of peer-support counselling and assurances of trust and confidentiality in relationships with

counsellors, which in turn helped children to communicate their feelings and responses to the separation more effectively.

Children's narratives on their experiences of coping and support underscore the value they perceived in having access to a dedicated professional with whom they could talk about their experiences. As previously mentioned, parents were sometimes reluctant to discuss the separation with their children as they wished to protect their children from any further distress. Similarly, children expressed the view that they did not wish to cause further upset to their parents by talking about it with them. Being able to communicate their feelings in a secure environment was therefore beneficial and constructive in its impact on enhancing children's ability to make sense of what was happening in their family contexts. In addition to the comfort and reassurance which they derived from this contact with services, many children spoke of how such contact helped them to gain a greater understanding of what was happening in their family lives and to better appreciate the behaviours and responses of their parents.

> *Well, she* [counsellor in Teen Between] *put a lot of things in
> perspective for me, even just talking about things … so without
> kind of spoon-feeding me what's happening, I kind of figured
> things out for myself.*
> (Girl, aged 17, 4 years since separation)

Children's narratives also provided clear affirmation of their facility for selfless reflection beyond the effects of the separation on their own lives, and of their ability to empathise with their parents, and the difficulties which they were experiencing:

> *It was hard for my mum 'cause she had two babies … two kids to mind … me*
>
> *and [child's sister] … and she didn't have dad … my dad to help her.* (Girl,
>
> aged 9, 5 years since separation)

A second factor highlighted in children's narratives was the opportunity which services provided for children to share their experiences with other peers who were living through similar transitions in their family lives. Many children highlighted the difficulties they had with feeling different from other children whose parents had not separated and it was, therefore, a source of comfort to them to be able to have contact with children living in similar contexts. This was particularly the case with children who attended peer-support groups such as Rainbows, which operates mainly through primary schools. Some children simply found it helpful to know that there were others who shared the experience of parental separation, as this reassured them that they were not isolated or alone, and that they were not different from

everybody else.

> *Rainbows helped me* [by showing me] *that other people suffer*
>
> *from the same thing that you do and that they would help you.*
>
> (Boy, aged 10, 8 years since separation)

Being with children who had similar experiences also helped some children to gain the confidence to speak about their own feelings.

> *Because I wasn't ashamed to say anything to them because they were*
>
> *all the same as me.*
>
> (Boy, aged 11, 1 year since separation)

This benefit was not restricted to group-based support, however, as some children who had received individual counselling also felt better able to talk about their feelings.

> *I feel that if I … hadn't have come* [to Teen Counselling] *my problems would have got worse … and it has kind of taught me how to speak and talk about how I felt … so it's easier now to say how I feel.*
> (Girl, aged 16, 13 years since separation)

A third factor identified in narratives was the value which children placed upon being able to build trusting relationships with counsellors and the knowledge that their exchanges with counsellors were in strict confidence

> [Rainbows helped] *because they helped to get everything out, like, 'cause they won't tell anyone.*
> (Girl, aged 8, 4 years since separation)

Barriers to seeking and taking up support in formal services

A number of obstacles to taking up support in formal support services became apparent in children's accounts of their experiences of coping and support and these are worth bearing in mind in terms of better being able to tailor services to meet children's needs. Key issues which children emphasized were: fear of stigmatization and not wishing to feel different, the need for easy and fast access to services at different times throughout the separation process, and concerns about family privacy. One of the primary reasons expressed in children's narratives for not wishing to seek support from formal support services, was the fear that they would be stigmatized in some way through contact with a service. Such a view was linked to the perception that counselling was only appropriate for children who were suffering from psychological disorder due to their parents' separation.

I didn't feel like I needed it totally because I wasn't like … like

mad in the head.

(Boy, aged 16, 5 years since separation)

Fear of stigmatisation was also linked to children's wish not to be singled out in any way from other children because of their parents' separation. In extreme cases, a small number of children indicated that they had been bullied and harassed to some extent because of the separation and this was very distressing.

We decided to move off that road because we kept on getting

jeered … people saying, 'your dad's gone,' and all.

(Girl, aged 9, 2 years since separation)

Similarly, one of the boys in the older group argued that it was preferable to talk to strangers, particularly in a group situation within a service, saying that group support would help, but that for reasons of confidentiality *'you'd have to get* [the participants] *from a different place'* (Boy, aged 16, 1 year since separation).

Children's sense of being different and their desire not to be singled out was an important factor influencing their reluctance to engage with services. This was particularly important for the older group of children as they were more aware of the responses of their peers and friends. A girl in the older group remarked that friends were

… the main people you'd be worried about what they think.

(Girl, aged 16, 5 years since separation)

Another young person stated that she was

… feeling isolated from everyone else because I was kind of different.

(Girl, aged 16, 13 years since separation)

Several children commented on the ways in which formal services might have been more supportive, and these comments referred to access to services. One girl had experienced a lengthy wait to gain access to counselling, and believed that support should be accessible more quickly. Another girl, who had been attending Rainbows and found it helpful, felt that she could have benefited from support as the separation process itself unfolded, as well as later on, when her father had moved out.

I was on my own [when I first found out] *… in the sense that no one was there to comfort me. If the Rainbows was there at that time it would have been a big help 'cause when it happens, see, you're, like, shocked.*

(Girl, aged 10, 5 years since separation)

A major preoccupation for many children was the strong belief they held that parental separation was a family matter and one which should not be discussed or disclosed beyond the family boundaries and this influenced the extent to which they were willing to accept support from any source outside the immediate family. Some children expressed the view that it would not be possible for counsellors to help because they were not familiar with the complex issues and relationships within the family. Inherent in these narratives was the view that such information rightfully belongs within the family and should not be disclosed to outside parties.

I didn't like [counselling] *… I felt that I'm telling someone who doesn't know anything about me … I didn't think* [the counsellor] *had the right to know about what happened in our family 'cause she's not part of it.*

(Girl, aged 14, 5 years since separation)

One girl within the older age group thought that support systems within schools could not adequately address the needs of young people experiencing separation, as young people might not want their peers or teachers to know what was going on in their private lives. She felt that support services outside schools could offer greater confidentiality, *'that nobody would notice'* (Girl, aged 17, 4 years since separation).

Patterns of Adjustment and Coping

Although many children reacted with shock and even distress to the separation initially and found the physical departure and absence of a parent to be upsetting, children's narratives indicated that most experienced adaptation and coping over time. Many children's narratives highlighted the process of "getting on" with life in the context of their changed family circumstances. The separation process was navigated most successfully by children who were satisfied with their arrangements for residence and visiting and with the level and stability of the involvement of their non-resident parents[1]. Children perceived maintaining contact to be mainly the responsibility of their non-resident parent, although some recognised the role they themselves played in negotiating the relationship over time.

It's up to him to make arrangements to see us but like he's not doing it.

(Boy, aged 14, 4 years since separation)

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[1] It is worth noting that children reported relatively high frequency of contact with their non-resident parents with approximately 68% of children seeing their non-resident parent at least once a week

My dad is still my parent and he still looks after me and he, like, makes sure that I have everything that I need and stuff. I'd say it is difficult for him … he finds it hard to deal with things that I come out with and he's trying to figure what he can do about it. I'd say that's hard for him. (Girl, aged 17, 3 years since separation)

Those children who had access to adequate information about what was going on, both initially and over time, without being drawn into their parents' relationship or conflict to an uncomfortable degree, also adapted more easily to the changes in family life post-separation. Conversely, children who had been denied access to helpful information about what was happening in their family life, expressed resentment and anger as in the case of the following adolescent:

I [felt angry] because I wasn't told what was, what was happening. Like my mum knew and … I thought I had the right to … know …even a bit about it … because I would have more time to deal with it.
(Boy, aged 15, 2 years since separation)

Children who were able to achieve a reduced sense of isolation were also coping better with the separation. It is important to point out that a number of children in the present study were living in families who were experiencing multiple difficulties within their family contexts. The present sample included 13 families where parental separation occurred in the context of further adversity, such as domestic violence, alcohol or drug abuse, and mental health problems of parents and/or children. These difficulties represented further stressors and possible barriers to positive adjustment to post-separation family life and the support needs of these children are likely to require individual and more complex responses.

Discussion

Children's descriptions of the process of the separation and how their family lives were affected in the present study were often sophisticated, reflecting a heightened awareness of family life and the ability to review and revise their own perspectives and understanding of what happened within their family. Children's narratives also demonstrated that they had the ability to reflect upon and review their expectations for the future as well as their role or the part they had played and potentially could play in actively affecting relationships and arrangements in the family. In line with these findings, the growth of child-centred research has opened up new perspectives on children's lives which attach greater importance to children's resilience and competence in the face of family transition. Increasingly, there is recognition and acceptance of the fact that children's perspectives often differ from those of adults and, therefore, merit inquiry in their own right, independent of adults' concerns. Work carried out within the Sociology of Childhood paradigm has drawn attention to the importance of considering children as being active in the construction and determination of their own social lives (James & Prout, 1997). Allied to this perspective, there has been a shift away from research which articulates the view that adults can do justice to a representation of the child's world, without placing the child at the centre of that research.

Children in the present study emphasised a range of different ways of coping and of needs for support, all of which may be met in different ways. This is consistent with previous research findings which indicate that there is no one model of support provision for children experiencing parental separation (Hawthorne et al., 2003; Trinder et al., 2002; Wade and Smart, 2002; Wilson and Edwards, 2003).

Most children availed of and valued support from both formal and informal sources. Outside of the family, formal support services emerged as the most valued source of support for

children. It is worth noting the high value placed by the children in this study on their counselling or peer group support experiences, consistent with other researchers who have found that the opportunity to discuss the separation with a trustworthy person outside the family is valued by some children (Hawthorne et al., 2003; Pruett, 1997).

Developmental patterns were also evident in children's narratives. For younger children, activities which offered opportunities for distraction were favoured over discussion sources of support, while older children highlighted the benefits of opportunities for communicating their feelings about and responses to the separation, either with peers or with professionals. Fawcett (2000) identified two types of support emphasised in adolescents' narratives - *emotional support*, which involved communicating feelings and receiving reassurances and *social support*, which included more activities and social interaction with peers. In the present study, the latter type of support was favoured particularly by the younger age group of children. Participating in a group for children whose parents had separated was perceived by younger children as being particularly instrumental in helping them to overcome a sense of feeling different and alienated from other children. Similar findings have emerged in UK studies (Wade & Smart, 2002; Dunn, Davies, O'Connor & Sturgess, 2001), where older children, especially adolescent girls, disclosed and discussed more with friends than did younger children as a means of coming to a better understanding of the separation, although they too valued parents as the most valuable source of support. It may be the case that adolescents could also benefit from a peer group model of support provision, which none of the children in the older age-group had access to in the present study. The availability and uptake of peer support models of intervention for adolescent children could usefully be assessed in light of this. The mechanisms through which services helped children adjust and cope were, therefore, wide-ranging, but the most significant benefit for children appeared to be the role of services in reducing the sense of isolation that children felt, helping them to make sense of their own views and responses to what was happening in their families.

A significant obstacle to seeking and accepting support from formal services was fear of being stigmatised through contact with formal services, which some children viewed as being indicative of psychological disorder or a lack of capacity to cope. Allied to this was children's expressed desire not to be distinguished from their peers because of parental separation. Notable in some children's narratives was the feeling that their families were different from other families, a finding also noted by Fawcett (1998) in her study of adolescents in Belfast. Children's sense of being apart was reflected in the reluctance of some children to talk to others outside their family about their parents' separation or divorce. For these children parental separation was a private matter and this feeling may be attributable to the cultural context, given that parental separation is still a relatively recent phenomenon in Irish society and divorce even moreso. It may also arise from a sense among children that others may judge them or their families negatively, or simply fail to understand separation and its meaning for children, combined with a cultural value for privacy in matters relating to family relationships. As pointed out by Pryor & Rodgers (2001), social beliefs, stigma and the extent to which views are valued are aspects of time and place that impinge on children's experiences of family change. In response to these findings, the need for greater public awareness of parental separation and its meaning, particularly in children's everyday environments, such as schools cannot be over-emphasised.

The present study findings point up the extent to which children may feel confused and isolated from other children when their parents separate. There is a need, therefore, for support services to be developed in a non-stigmatising way with the objective of reducing negative feelings and enhancing children's facilities for communicating their feelings and developing the confidence to express their feelings and views with others, should they wish to. The importance of developing multi-disciplinary, integrative and collaborative practices in relation to the provision of support for children in families in transition is highlighted in a recent review of support services for children (Bagshaw, Quinn & Schmidt, 2006). The present study findings also underscore the benefits that children can gain from discussion with

other adults and children who have experienced parental separation themselves. A review of the research in the UK suggests that there is a particular lack of such direct support for children, in spite of evidence of its benefits for children (Rodgers & Pryor, 1998). It is also important to keep in mind, however, that not all children want or feel they need to attend services for counselling, for a range of different reasons, including their reluctance to disclose details about their family to non-family members, their expectations that others may not understand them, and the possible perception that attending support services may mark them out as inadequate or 'needing help'.

Finally, complex and individual family circumstances were experienced by a small number of children in the study. The needs of children coping with an additional layer of problems, including alcohol and drug abuse and the mental health problems of their parents, must be given special consideration in light of these findings. Where psychiatric problems are the root cause of parental separation, the provision of family support services and counselling for all family members is desirable. The establishment of the Family Support Agency in 2003 represents a positive development in the provision of support for families in Ireland, ranging from family mediation, marriage and relationship counselling to developing family and community resource centres throughout the country.

In the Republic of Ireland, over the last decade in particular, we have witnessed a growing emphasis on including children's views as part of research and policy development. However, as pointed out in the National Children's Strategy (Government of Ireland, 2000), despite this interest there continues to be limited empirical data and research-based knowledge on issues concerning children and their families in Irish society. In order to improve the quality and effectiveness of services provided to children and their families, further research-based knowledge incorporating children's views and experiences is urgently needed. Acknowledgement of the importance of children's perspectives is now increasingly reflected

across a broad spectrum of fields**.** Family life experiences are complex and, as evidenced throughout this study, children, as reflexive, participating agents in the unfolding story of family life, can greatly contribute to our understanding of and support responses to the complexities surrounding their experiences of changing family circumstances.

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