What Children Think Separating Parents Should Know

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The predominant view of children from separated families is as vulnerable victims. It is often believed that decisions about children's welfare and best interests should solely be made by adults. The present paper demonstrates that children are social actors in their changing families, who have their own views and some useful advice to give to separating parents. One hundred and seven children between seven and nineteen years of age were interviewed about what advice they would give parents who were separating. The advice was coded into the following categories:- Consulting with Children, Parental Relationships, Suggestions about Arrangements, Not Separating, Considering children, the Well-Being of Children and Keeping Children Informed. The strongest theme to emerge was that parents should keep children informed, listen to them, respect their views, and take their views into account in decision-making. The study suggested that if children are involved in decisions which affect them, they will be more likely to adjust to their post-separation families. Psychologists and other professionals working with children and families can encourage families (and the court) to allow children's voices to be heard.

The discourse and research on divorce has tended to focus on the risks and negative effects of divorce on children. A large body of research has now been built up examining the effect of separation and divorce on children. A recent review (Rodgers & Pryor, 1998) sums up the findings of over 200 research studies and concludes that children from separated families have a higher probability of adverse outcomes. However, long-term negative effects typically apply to only a small number of children, who are about twice as likely as children from intact families to have less favourable outcomes. They are more likely to experience poverty, to have behavioural problems, to perform less well at school, to need medical treatment, to leave school/home when young, to be sexually active at an early age, and to be depressed. Amato's (2000) review suggests that whether the well-being of children is adversely affected by parental divorce, depends on such factors as disruptions in parent-child relationships, loss of emotional support, economic hardship and other negative life events.

The Children's Issues Centre research has attempted to focus its research on what factors might help children to be resilient to the risks of divorce/separation, and determine ways of supporting their well being following family change. Family dynamics are clearly an important factor in how well children adjust to their parents' divorce/separation. Amato (2000) suggests that children are protected from the effects of divorce by active coping skills, and support from family and friends. The frequency and nature of contact with non resident parents is one aspect of post separation families which we have explored (Gollop, Smith, & Taylor, 2000; Smith & Gollop, 2000). Frequency of contact with non resident parents is, however, not a particularly good predictor of child outcomes. A recent meta-analysis (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999) suggests that warm, authoritative fathering, and positive, supportive, co-operative co-parenting behaviours are part of a pattern which are associated with positive child coping, whereas negative, hostile behaviours (to the child or to the former partner) are associated with risk for children.

Other research supports the view that conflict before, during and after separation is likely to exacerbate problems (Amato, 1993; Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Amato, 2000; Pryor & Seymour, 1996; Emery, 1999; Kelly, 2000; Lamb, 1999; Lamb, Sternberg & Thompson, 1999; Whiteside & Becker, 2000) and that quality rather than quantity of contact is the most important factor (Munsch, Woodward & Darling, 1995). Our research seeks to add a qualitative dimension to the outcome research, in order to reach a better understanding of the meaning of quality, by looking at

children's perspectives of the processes which take place in families after separation. Research on children's perspectives shows that on the whole children enjoy access with non-custodial parents and that many children would like more contact, though they are only rarely consulted about access arrangements (McDonald, 1990; Gollop, Taylor & Smith, 2000). Several of our current papers (Gollop, Smith, & Taylor, 2000; Taylor, Gollop, & Smith, 2000; Smith & Gollop, in press; Tapp & Taylor, 2001) highlight the agency of children and the strength and coherence of their views about their experiences following their parents' separation.

Much of the research looking at the effect of parental separation on children constructs them as the passive victims of their parents' separation experiences. More recent theoretical perspectives emerging from the sociology of childhood and family law have been critical of this approach (Mayall, 2000; Gollop, Smith & Taylor, 2000; Henaghan & Tapp, 2000; Neale, 2000; Smart, 2000; Smart & Neale, 2000; Smith, & Taylor, 2000; Sviggum, 2000; Tapp & Henaghan, 2000; Tapp & Taylor, 2001). Piper (1996) argues that children's positioning as the vulnerable victims of divorce is reflected in family law. She challenges the image of the child as a victim to be protected by the legal system, and argues that the prevailing image of the child as the victim of divorce, while useful to policy makers and professional practitioners, is unlikely to lead to reformed divorce processes which are better for children. This narrow construction of children denies them agency and an independent voice, and casts them in a passive role. She urges that children's autonomy rights as well as their protection rights should be promoted. Similarly Oakley (1994) is highly critical of a discourse in which the welfare of children (and women) is based not on what they want or need, but on what other people think is in their best interests. She describes this as "a philosophy of exclusion and control, dressed up as protection" (p. 16).

Encouraging children to express their views and taking these into account when decisions are made affecting them is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC), which was ratified by New Zealand in 1993. Professionals working with children therefore have a responsibility to implement Article 12, which states that children's views should be taken into account in matters which affect them, and Article 13 which says that children have the right of access to information. The nature of decision-making within post separation families, and by agencies or individual professionals supporting families, can be strongly influenced by views of childhood, and interpretations of research. The current Guardianship Act requires the Family Court to find out the wishes of the child (section 23(2)) and these are usually ascertained by section 29a report writers (psychologists) or counsel for the child, and occasionally through the judge speaking with the child directly. During the mediation process before Counsel for the Child is appointed, and in family decision-making where parents reach agreements without recourse to professionals, children's views are not usually sought (McDonald, 1990; Gollop, Taylor & Smith, 2000). Hence psychologists, as well as legal professionals, have a very important part to play in facilitating good decisions, and part of that process involves making sure that children's voices are heard. Psychologists also work with parents, and can help parents to focus on how children are affected by family changes. The findings of the present study should help psychologists, counsellors and lawyers to give useful advice to parents, highlighting a child-focused perspective.

There are strong implications for child and family psychologists of this new wave of research on divorce and separation, and concern with children's rights. In the past many child mental health professionals have assumed that they could make decisions about children's best interests without taking into account children's perspectives on their own family situation. Children's competence and understanding have been underestimated, and generalisations inappropriately applied to individuals. Oakley (1994, p. 22) is critical of the way that "grand overarching generalizations" about children are used to build concepts of childhood, while studies of children's experiences in everyday environments are neglected. The UNCROC provision that age and maturity must be taken into consideration often means that professional assumptions about children's competency to have and express a view, have a major influence on whether their views are sought. Thus an adult view of the child's welfare is still an important component of the aftermath of separation for children. New theoretical understandings and research with children, viewing them as subjects and social actors, suggest that a welfarist approach to children needs to be balanced by a citizenship approach. A citizenship approach respects children's competence and allows them to be active participants in decisions about their welfare. "If adult 'experts' are to make decisions for children, they need to take into account the ways children experience and react to their circumstances, both past and present. This is best done by talking to children, for children are the 'experts' when it comes to their own perceptions, worries, joys" (Sviggum, 2000, p62).

The present study reports on data about children's advice to parents who were separating, when they were making custody and access decisions. The paper reports on one part of a more extensive interview study of children's perspectives on their relationships with non-custodial parents. This paper focuses on identifying any ideas children had about how parents could contribute to their children's well being after a separation or divorce.

Methodology

Participants

One hundred and seven children[3] of separated parents in 73 families from six Family Court districts in New Zealand participated in the research. Participants (parents and children) were invited to participate through two main approaches – letters sent out to families by the Family Court co-ordinators (on behalf of the Children's Issues Centre), and advertising in community newspapers. Consent (written or verbal) was gained from children in all cases. There were

55 females and 52 males in the sample. Their ages ranged from 7.41 years to 18.65 years, with a mean age of 12.92 years (sd=2.86 years). Twenty-three of the children were aged between seven and nine years, 32 were aged between ten and twelve years, 34 were aged between thirteen and fifteen years, and 18 were in the sixteen to eighteen-year-old bracket.

At the time of their parents' separation some of the children had not yet been born or were young babies. The eldest age at the time of parental separation was 15.69 years. When we spoke to the children it had been an average of 6.20 years since the separation, making the children's age at the separation an average of 6.72 years (sd=3.81 years).

The majority of the children (88 or 82.2%) were New Zealanders of European descent. Eleven children (10.4%) were Maori, two children's ethnicity was Pacific Island (1.9%), and four children had a mixed Maori and Pacific Island heritage (3.7%). One child (0.9%) was Asian, and one child's ethnicity was unknown.

The most common custody arrangement was for the mother to be the custodial or resident parent. Ninety-two children (86%) lived with their mothers, eight (7.5%) lived with their fathers and a further seven children (6.5%) had a shared care or joint custody arrangement, sharing their time fairly equally between both of their parents. Only seven of the children (6.5%) had no contact whatsoever with their non-resident parent.

Procedure

Families were recruited from six regional districts/cities of New Zealand: Invercargill, Timaru, Christchurch, Hawkes Bay, and Auckland (North Shore and Waitakere). Interviewers travelled to each area to conduct the interviews with the children, the majority of which took place in the child's home. The interviews were open-ended and designed to elicit rich descriptions of the issues from the children's perspectives. The interview schedule covered many issues about the child's experience of their parents' separation, but this paper deals with the section of the interview which was devoted to asking children what advice, if any, they would give other parents who were currently separating and devising custody and access arrangements for their children. The interviewers, who included the second author, were all highly trained and experienced in working with children (see Gollop, 2000).

Data analysis

Each interview was transcribed and the transcripts were read and re-read by the two authors, who identified categories of children's responses which fitted in to the conceptual framework and the research questions which guided the study. Megan Gollop then coded each response into the categories. If she had any doubts about the categorisation, Megan consulted with Anne Smith and a decision was made jointly. No formal reliability check was carried out, but this study is based on a qualitative approach which acknowledges varying interpretations of social reality (Silverman, 2000). The categories were used as a way of ordering and systematising the data, and statistical hypotheses were not involved. Each child's response was coded according to the type of advice they would give to parents within the eight categories which emerged. The overall percentage of children's responses in each category was calculated, and a variety of examples within each category identified.

Results and Discussion

This research gives an overview of some of the advice children suggest to parents who are separating. Children in separated families have a diverse range of experiences and there is no one pattern which fits all of them, so it is interesting to see that there are common issues raised independently by these children in their advice to parents. Two thirds of the children had some advice to offer parents, so although some children had no messages for parents, the majority did contribute. There is a great deal of wisdom and good sense in many of the children's comments, from which parents and professionals could greatly benefit, in our view.

Of the 107 children who participated in the study 28 children (26 %) said they had no advice to give or did not know what advice they would give. Data were missing for another 11 children (10 %) who were either not asked the question, did not respond, or misinterpreted the question. (The question came near the end of a long interview, and if interviewers judged children to be tired or not motivated to continue, this question was occasionally omitted). This resulted in 68 children (64 %) providing some sort of advice which was coded into eight categories according to the type of advice given. These categories were not mutually exclusive and the advice the children would give parents could fall into more than one category.

As shown by Table 1, the most common response given by half of the children who provided some advice involved the importance of consulting children. This category included such comments as: listening to the child, giving the child the choice about their custody/access arrangements, letting the child make decisions about their living arrangements, letting children have their say and checking that arrangements made for children suited them. Comments about the relationship between parents were made by 24% of the children. These included advising

Table 1: Type of advice given

Category	Number of children	Percentage of the sample
1. Consultation	34	50
2. Parental relationship	16	24
3. Arrangements	13	19
4. Not separating	7	10
5. Consideration of children	7	10
6. Children's well-being	7	10
7. Providing information	7	10
8. Other	5	7

parents not to fight or argue in front of the children, to avoid conflict and try to co-operate, and not to let conflict impact on children or get in the way of children having a relationship with both of their parents. Nearly a fifth of the children gave advice about custody and/or access arrangements – this included suggestions about workable or practical arrangements or advising parents to decide on arrangements which were fair to all concerned, particularly the children. Equal numbers of children advised parents: not to separate in the first place or get back together (10%); to consider their children's feelings and needs (10%) and to be aware of the impact of separation on children and their well-being (10%); and to provide their children with information about the changes in their lives (10%). Seven percent of the children gave other types of responses which did not fit within any of the above categories.

The issues raised by the children as advice they would give parents will now be illustrated with quotes from the children themselves. Sociologists of childhood have been highly critical of children's ideas having been dominated by "the disciplinary boundaries of psychology" and argue that children are social actors with beliefs and perspectives of their own who are located in particular cultural and historical contexts (Prout & James, 1990, p83). We have argued that it is important to move away from the dominant discourse of children being the voiceless and invisible objects of concern (Smith & Taylor, 2000) so have put the voices of the children in the foreground of this paper. Some examples of children's comments have been identified, which in the judgement of the researchers are representative of the overall data. It is acknowledged, however, that each child has a different subjective experience, and that it is difficult to encompass the richness and variety of children's views in this selection.

1. The Importance of Consulting Children

This was by far the most common piece of advice the children would give to parents who were separating, with half of the children believing it was important. There were several themes within this category including advice to listen to children, ask children what they want, give children choices, respect those choices, and/or check that custody/ access arrangements suit children.

(i) Listen to children

Parents, listen to your kids. Just make sure that you're listening to them and not having any preconceptions about what you think they want and make sure you listen to them and that you tell them what's going on. (Kayla, aged 16)

The only thing I'd say would be to like listen to your kids and let them have their say because ... for the kids, it must be real hard. ... They've got to really listen to the kids to let them know how they're feeling. Like say if they split up and like both parents wanted them, they'd have to like consult you and listen to you to who you wanted to go with. (Yvonne, aged 12)

I guess [it] depends how old the kids are. If the kids can talk and say, then they should listen to the kids and tell them what they want. But if they're a bit littler then I guess it's up to the parents. (Jayne, aged 14)

(ii) Ask children for their views and give them a say

I'd say to them you should ask your children what they would like. Like see how much time they want to spend with their Dad and their Mum, so they get a fair say out of it. (Todd, aged 12)

Talk to your kids definitely and let them have an input and let them have a say and regard them around the matters. I know that it's between the two of them but you've got to have your kids in mind here. You know, you can't just push them aside 'cos the kids are the ones that get hurt a lot by it as well, so yeah, definitely talk to your kids and see what they think. (Petra, aged 17)

Ask the child what they want ... so they have a say. (Hamish, aged 12)

(iii) Give children the choice

Some children thought parents should let the children choose what they wanted in terms of custody and access arrangements – either allowing children to make the decision themselves or choose from a list of options.

I don't think parents should always assume that they know what their kids are thinking 'cos half the time what they think that their kids are thinking is nowhere near what they're thinking and sometimes just let your kids make their own decisions instead of making them themselves 'cos that's really annoying. Especially like when you're older and your parents are still treating you like a little kid. (Judith, aged 16)

Just let the kid choose who he wants to go with for the week or the weekend. (Hemi, aged 11)

If you give them set out choices - not just "What do you want?" but "Do you want so and so or do you want so and so, or we could do it some other way if you have any other ideas." ... But still giving them an option ... so they know what their options are. (Kayla, aged 16)

(iv) Respect children's choices

Respecting and honouring the choices that children made was also advised – including avoiding pressuring or forcing children to do things against their will.

Let their child figure out whenever they wanted to go and see their Dad or Mum and if a child wanted to go and see their Dad like on special occasions, when like their Mum's going to do something, and their Mum's bossing them round to stay there, don't do that because the kid wouldn't like it and he'd just probably go and run to his Dad's place and all that. (Seth, aged 9)

... some parents try to force you into things that you don't want to do, but you end up doing them, but it's miserable and you regret it totally. ... It's not all that force sort of thing. If you want something you don't approach it like "I'm ordering you to ..." ... Don't keep a hand over their mouth of what they can't say and all that sort of thing. (Claudia, aged 13)

Don't force your children to do anything because they'll just hate you for it. Like if they don't want to go out with

you this afternoon or whatever say "Shall we make another time?" or whatever. (Sophie, aged 16)

(v) Check arrangements suit the children

Rather than parents offering their children the opportunity to devise or decide on an arrangement some children thought it was important that parents checked that the custody and access arrangements they had decided upon were acceptable to their children.

Just make sure that the kids like it too. (Toni, aged 12)

Make sure that they're happy with it and make sure that they see enough time with both of yous. (Beth, aged 9)

The theme of listening to children and consulting them comes through strongly from the children who suggested advice. This provides firm support for arguments that feeling they are listened to, that their views are respected and have an influence on arrangements, is an important factor in helping children to cope with the stress of parental separation.

Children feel diminished and disempowered if they are treated as if they are invisible, and denied voice. Judith believes that parents should not assume that they know what their children are thinking, and pointed out how annoying it is when parents treat older children as if they were still little children. Claudia described how miserable children feel when they are forced into doing things by parents; Sophie explained that children will respond to coercion with hostility, illustrating the insights that children have to the way that they have been excluded.

The importance of adults providing appropriate support for children to formulate their own views is highlighted by the present study, as it has been previously (Gollop, Smith & Taylor, 2000; Taylor et al, 2000). For example, Kayla elaborated on the issue of how parents should consult children, by pointing out that parents can help children by the way they consult with them. She suggests that parents can give children several options instead of an open-ended question about what they want. Similarly in our study of children's perspectives on their lawyers (Taylor et al, 2000) children thought that lawyers could be most effective in representing children when they engaged in ongoing dialogue, active discussion and consideration of alternatives with them. Children cannot be expected to contribute to sound decisions unless they have the chance to formulate their own views, and consider and reflect on alternatives, within the context of a supportive relationship.

Respecting children's wish for consultation does not imply that children should be left alone to make decisions without adult input. Alderson (2001) argues that we should emphasise the value of interdependency between adults and children, rather than seeing agency and dependency as dichotomous opposites with adults on one side and children on the other. Melton (1999) recommends a model of graduated decision-making which gradually gives young people more responsibility for decisions, while initially sharing in decisions with them. Sociocultural theory supports an understanding of agency as emerging from a social context where children and adults are engaged and involved in reciprocal interactions with others, and where children are guided by skilled and sensitive adults (Smith & Taylor, 2000).

2. Parental Relationship

Nearly a quarter of the children made comments about conflict between the parents, advising them to: avoid conflict, especially in front of the children; refrain from putting down the other parent in front of the children; and to avoid placing children in the middle of the conflict or allowing the conflict to interfere with the children's relationship with both parents.

(i) Avoid conflict

Just don't argue and on the phone or anything. Like if the kid was there and they argue on the phone, like they wouldn't feel very happy. ... Like they can argue when kids aren't here but with them here, it upsets the kids and that. (Alan, aged 12)

Don't fight because your child ... probably wouldn't like it and ... try and ... not to fight. ... Oh, try to talk to each other better than you were last time. (Seth, aged 9)

You shouldn't fight and stuff like that 'cos you're acting like some wee kids when they fight, like me and my sister or something like that. (Evan, aged 11)

Be quite nice about it. Like if possible don't let the parents argue that much, and if the parents get on quite well then, the children will, but if the parents are always angry and fighting and like being beat up or something, then it's not going to work out that well. (Colin, aged 13)

(ii) Refrain from putting down the other parent

Don't ... like "Oh I thought you liked me more?" or "Why do you want to go and live with that loser?" Like yeah keep it objective. (Damian, aged 18)

(iii) Don't put child in middle/allow conflict to impact on children

Don't let the kid get caught in between all their problems. Don't let the kids be the piggy in the middle. If you're going to have a fight don't bring the kid into it. (Gabrielle, aged 14)

Just consider the children I think. I can see like the parents just getting so caught up in their own emotions and problems and ... trying to have as little to do with the other half as possible, and so if that means ... instead of like picking them up and dropping them off, like seeing the other parent on alternate days when you'd have to. (Kevin, aged 18)

The need for parental communication, warm interaction, and involvement with children is a powerful message from the children's advice. Another important idea which emerged from the interviews with children, was the importance of parents making an effort to maintain a harmonious relationship with their former partners, or at least avoiding a conflictual relationship. Clearly this is not a new idea in the divorce literature. It does however provide

useful qualitative validation of the often replicated finding that one of the factors associated with poorer outcomes for children is parental conflict. (Amato, 1993; Lamb, 1999; Lamb et al, 1999). Children report that they are placed in an intolerable position when parents cannot hide their hostility from each other, and that they find it highly aversive to be drawn into the cycle of negative relationships. Colin, thought that children would be more likely to show their anger and aggression towards each other if their parents did, indicating his understanding of the influence of modelling on behaviour. Damian believes that witnessing parental conflict builds up considerable anger in children. This suppressed anger (also described in other interview data) may lead to later externalising behaviours such as aggression.

3. Custody/Access Arrangements

Nearly one-fifth of the children provided advice for parents in relation to custody and/or access arrangements. Some gave suggestions about the details of arrangements, while others thought it was important that parents decide on arrangements which were fair to children and/or their parents.

(i) Suggestions of arrangements

If they had to split up, equal access to each parent. (Julian, aged 10)

If somebody was like in another country and they were really, really, really rich, the kids should, if they live with one parent, they should see the other parent every holidays. (Aroha, aged 9)

Well work it out so that it's quite even, so the kid gets to spend a lot of time with the parent that he's not with, in holidays or something like that. ... The kid, he's going to see more of the parent that he's [living] with, but share opportunities. (Lance, aged 14)

Don't split up the kids 'cos that's just rotten. Just keep the kids together. Even if they're not close, ... even if they don't show it, like if they fight all the time and so you split them up. ... They need each other really. Even if you think "Oh, they hate each other so I'll take him and you take her." Keep them together anyway. ... Like if the parents are getting separated, it doesn't mean the kids have to. (Louise, aged 15)

(ii) Decide on fair arrangements

I reckon you should try and make it fair, but see I always wanted to be with my Mum so I wasn't being fair on my Dad, but that's just the way it was. I just wasn't happy spending too much time with him. Like if you get on with both your parents then like just spend half time with each other. (Kelly, aged 15)

I'd tell them to try and make it fair and to bear in mind what the kid feels. And so that's fair on the parents too. ... Plan ahead first ... plan ahead lots, so that the arrangements don't get muddled up, 'cos then you get really excited about doing something really fun with one parent except it changes on you maybe the day before and that really puts you down. (Gregory, aged 9)

Custody and access decisions are an inevitable part of family dynamics after parents separate, and these decisions and how they are implemented have a profound effect on children's daily lives. The suggestions made by the children reflect their own feelings and situations, but their thinking reflects their recognition of concepts of fairness, equity, flexibility and careful planning. It is interesting that they are not only thinking of fairness from the point of view of the child, but fairness to parents as well. They made entirely reasonable suggestions like Louise's idea of keeping siblings together even if they fought. We have written in several other papers (Gollop, Smith & Taylor, 2000; 200b; Smith & Gollop, in press) about children's involvement in custody and access decisions. The wider research project shows that only a very small number of children have any input into custody decisions. About a fifth were consulted about custody (although of course many were too young at the time) and just over a third (37%) were consulted about access. Age did not seem to have much impact on whether children were consulted except that over 13 year-olds were more likely to be consulted.

4. Don't Separate

Surprisingly only a very small minority of children argued that parents should not be so ready to divorce or should re-unite. One in ten children thought that parents should not separate in the first place, or should try and get back together.

Get married once for crying out loud, 'cos ... I think marriage is sacred and I think you should marry your soul mate and that's it basically. ... Just reiterate the fact that everybody should only get married once. Make it a hell of a lot easier in the first place. And the way you do that is you sort yourself out first. Get yourself settled and have a lifestyle of your own and then you find someone else who has their own lifestyle and then you see if your lifestyles fit. Don't get me started. (Kevin, aged 18)

In an earlier study (Smith, Taylor, Gollop, Gaffney, Gold & Henaghan, 1997) we found a much higher proportion (two thirds) of the children wished that their parents would get back together, and this was particularly the case for younger children. The participants in the current study were more likely to have been recruited through the family court, the families probably included more examples of high conflict than the earlier study. The children from more conflictual families are perhaps more likely to have held a realistic view of the chances of successful re-unification.

5. Consider the Children

Ten percent of the children advised parents to think about their children and consider their feelings.

Think about your children before you act. (Brendan, aged 12)

Just think of what the kids will feel like and think of them more. (Louise, aged 15)

6. Children's Well-being

In a similar vein to considering children, seven children advised parents to be aware of the impact a separation can have on children's well-being and/or to provide help and support for their children.

Go to the professional people and always sort it out. Sort out the blame thing with the kids - "It's all my fault. What have I done wrong?" That really should be sorted out first. In front of the parents - I want, I need, this is my time and all of that. (Ella, aged 14)

They can't ever realise how much it affects a child unless it's happened to them. They're never going to fully realise how deeply it does affect the child and how much it will change the child, the course of the child's life and I'd really like to let all parents know that and to know that even if separation is the best thing and they never want to see their partner again, it's absolutely vital that they make a huge effort to try and make a child's life, especially a young child, as stable as possible because there's nothing worse than a child just not knowing where they are and not having a foundation. ..... When they're separating, really focus on the child and what they can do for the child. (Charlotte, aged 18)

I'd tell them like, take it easy on their children 'cos their children are going through a rougher stage than they are. (Polly, aged 13)

Children's wishes to have their well-being considered, and to be given love and support from their parents when they split up, is another issue which makes good sense in the light of the research literature. Several authors (Amato, 1993; Hetherington, Law & O'Connor, 1993) have suggested that one of the reasons divorce affects children adversely is that their parenting behaviours are disrupted by the hurt that they themselves feel immediately after the break-up. This makes it particularly difficult for them to focus on the needs of the children. It is likely that children will adjust more rapidly to the difficult transition of their parents' separation, if parents are aware of children's feelings and, as Polly advises, "*take it easy*" on them. Parents need to be supported in keeping things on an even keel for the children, and if they are unable to do so, then there should be policies in place to ensure that children have some other adult or peer support (such as free counselling or group programmes) over this difficult time. While there are facilities for parental counselling in the Family Court, there is currently no such facility for children. A variety of initiatives by community groups (such as Mirror Counselling in Dunedin) attempt to provide such services for children and young people, but they often lack support and resources.

7. Provide Children With Information

Another ten percent of the children thought that parents should keep their children informed about what was happening and to give thoughtful explanations about the separation which did not lead to a child feeling bad or guilty.

I would say just sort it out in a way so that the children won't get sad. Like only tell the children like in a nice way, so that "Dad's going to live there and you'll live with me, but you'll see Dad quite often and you'll be allowed to talk to him on the phone and write letters." (Alex, aged 8)

Well, I think some kids, like their parents won't tell them why they're separating and that sort of thing and they're like "[My] father ... he doesn't love me anymore." I think that would be hard. I think they're better to tell them that they're separating, but not for a trial, because I never actually got over that ... I was like waiting and like, "When's he coming back?" (Jodie, aged 15)

Make sure they know what's going on or else it gets really confusing for a kid. And so if they know what's going on then they can feel like they've at least got some control over the situation. (Kayla, aged 16)

The main message coming from the children concerned the need for them to be consulted, but associated with this was that they needed to be informed. Providing children with information, is another facet of consultation. Jodie's description of the pain of not knowing that her father wasn't coming back, is an example of the disempowerment that comes from not knowing. It is difficult for children to provide a useful input when they are ignorant of important events taking place in their family. While parents may be trying to protect children by not talking to them or telling them about difficult issues, it is confusing and perplexing for them when they are excluded (Richards, 1996).

Children's inclusion in dialogue and interactions with parents and other people who are important to them before, during and after the separation is essential for their well being and understanding, as well as their adjustment to the change. When parents are not communicating and children find out isolated bits of information by accident (for example overhearing telephone calls), their distress is likely to be heightened. If parents are unable to pass on clear, accurate and consistent explanations to their children, then there is a strong argument for another adult outside the family to explain to them what has happened. More discussion needs to be focused on who can fulfil this role most effectively and what structures can be set in place to allow this to happen.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that children are indeed competent social actors who reflect and devise their own ideas and strategies for coping with family life after their parents separate, and that their views are worth listening to. It has often been assumed that children are not competent to participate in decisions, especially when they are younger. This assumption of children's incompetence has recently been widely challenged in the literature (Prout & James, 1990; Mayall, 2000; Oakley, 1994; Sviggum, 2000), and we believe that this study adds weight to the view that even quite young children can offer sensible and mature advice to parents. In the current climate where parents' (especially fathers') rights and well-being are such a dominant part of public and professional discourse it is timely to consider the rights of children to have their views listened to and taken into account. While "the best interests of the child" have always been a consideration in the aftermath of divorce

in legal contexts, these have almost always been strongly dominated by professional assumptions about what is good or bad for children (Piper, 2000).

There were some limitations to the study. It is difficult to recruit a representative sample of children from separated families, and children's participation in a study such as this was very much influenced by their parents' views of the value of participation. Interviews were often conducted at home and on a few occasions there was not complete privacy for the children to talk freely to interviewers. Children may also have been influenced by which parent's home they were interviewed in. The categories developed by the researchers to analyse the children's responses were dependent on their joint judgement, as no systematic reliability check was carried out.

While there is no great contradiction between what children say and the type of principles which are generally considered in guiding decisions (e.g. avoiding conflict), there is one principle which the children have highlighted - and that is the importance of consulting and informing children. We have questioned the dominant welfare discourse of the child as a victim, and suggested an alternative view of children as social actors. The strongest message that we would like to suggest, and that we believe is a relatively new one in the divorce literature, is that the effects of divorce/separation are likely to be more deleterious when children are ignored, not consulted, and not involved in decisions which affect them.

While the most important influence on children is likely to be from the family members themselves, professionals working with children in various roles (social workers, psychologists, counsellors and lawyers) play a very important role in assisting families to cope and support their children. They also frequently have an influence on the decisions which are made about children. It is our view that respect for children's personhood and voice on the part of professionals is an important component of their professional roles, and soundly based on ethical principles and research.

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Note

For ease of reading the word 'children' has been used to refer to both children and young people. All the names used in this paper are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants. Quotes have been edited for ease of reading.

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