Children's Perspectives and Experience of the Divorce Process  
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Summary of research results

Children played many active, often unacknowledged, roles during the divorce including carer, conciliator, advice giver, and support provider. Despite this, they frequently felt excluded from decisions which directly affected them and expressed a wish to be actively considered and consulted at all stages of the process. Children did not want to be seen as passive victims of their parents’ marital breakdown, but as participants and actors in the transition and ongoing reconstruction of family life.

Understanding what was happening

- Even where children were aware of difficulties in their parents’ relationship, the effect of a parent leaving was immediate and profound. Few children were actively ‘prepared’ by their parents for the separation, even where parents themselves were planning the split.
- While 94% of parents said they had told child about the divorce, only 69% of children agreed. Over a third (39%) recalled nothing being said at the time of separation about the possibility of their parents divorcing, yet only 13% of parents agreed that nothing had been said.
- Children wanted their parents to take responsibility for keeping them informed and involved in what was happening.
- Nearly two-thirds (62%) of children reported that they had kept the divorce secret from some people. They feared being teased or made the subjects of gossip. In some cases, such fears were realised.
- Children’s understanding of the legal process was poor and generally derived from (misleading) television or cinema portrayals. They reported being told little by their parents but were less interested or concerned about this than other aspects of the marriage breakdown.

Evaluating changes in their lives

- Children largely viewed changes brought about by the divorce in terms of loss. What was most acutely felt was the loss of the absent parent, leaving an ‘empty space’ in the child’s life.
• Children were rarely involved in decisions about which parent they would live with; most regarded being asked to ‘choose’ as too great a burden. However, they did want to be asked their opinions on residence and contact.
• Children often used the language of ‘time’ as a metaphor for their relationship with a parent. They were concerned about how much time they would spend with each parent; competed with siblings for a parent’s ‘time’ (i.e. attention); and resented a parent giving time to a new partner or half-sibling.
• Most children reported at least a short-term hiatus in contact with the non-resident parent following the separation. For most, a pattern of contact subsequently emerged, consisting of regular weekly visits followed by staying contact with longer periods during holidays.
• Children valued flexible contact arrangements that took account of their other interests and commitments as well as those of their parents.
• Few children reported no change in the quality of their relationship with their parents. Those relationships that had previously been positive most easily survived the trauma. Description of less satisfactory relationships was usually dominated by expressions of anger directed at the ‘blameworthy’ or absent parent or simply at the whole world.
• Some children undertook relationship maintenance tasks for their parents including answering adult anxieties about the future and regrets over the past or maintaining adult to adult communication.
• Many parents seem to have handled the introduction of a new partner badly. Children preferred openness and an opportunity to get used to the idea and new partner over time.
• Children were generally reluctant to view new partners as substitutes for their own parents. They particularly resented attempts to ‘act’ like a parent.
• Most children said the arrival of a new partner did not substantially alter their relationship with their parents and the majority liked the new partner.
• The warmth and closeness of relationships with step- and half-siblings seemed to be a function of the relationship between the child and the parent.

Coping and support networks

• Many children actively sought to talk to others for reassurance, advice or comfort. They turned to parents, family members, friends, pets, and toys as appropriate.
• Commonly, children sought to distract themselves from what was happening by having fun with friends or taking part in sport; watching TV or sleeping; or simply ‘keeping out of the way’.
• Some turned to more aggressive or destructive behaviours - e.g. tantrums, causing minor damage to property. They often expressed their emotions through crying. A minority took refuge in habitual behaviours including nail-biting and smoking.
• Many children created time and space to ‘think through’ what was happening and to regain some cognitive control over events.
Parents were the most obvious providers of emotional support, information and advice, with the resident parent usually best placed to help.

Parents had difficulty in accurately assessing the impact of divorce on their children.

Only a third of children turned to siblings for support.

Other relatives, especially grandparents, were valued. Grandparents’ homes were often viewed as ‘safe’ or ‘neutral’ territory.

For many children, their most significant sources of support were friends.

Over half (57%) of the children said they had no unrelated adult to whom they could talk. Some found individual teachers helpful, and most were glad that teachers ‘knew’ about the divorce, not to provide support but to understand any change in the child’s behaviour.

Professional support did not feature significantly in many children’s experience.

Children would have appreciated being able to access support themselves, for example through helplines and the internet.

**Children's Appraisal of Divorce Scale**

In our study we took an initial step towards developing the ‘Children’s Appraisal of Divorce Scale’ (CADS). Through the KIDs Activity Book children responded to 113 divorce-related items. Exploratory factor analysis indicated the existence of new dimensions of importance in measuring children's appraisals of divorce. The dimensions were: protection of and appreciation of adult situation, divided loyalties, interparental dynamic, go-between, coping and concern for parents, and partisanship and guilt. These new divorce-related dimensions represent a unique contribution in measuring children's reactions to divorce. This finding suggests further development of CADS is warranted. Such a measure would be of value to professionals with whom children interact during parental separation and divorce - enabling better understanding of children’s needs and the provision of better support.