

Children's Involvement in their Parents' Divorce: Implications for Practice

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The paper reports findings from a research study that explored children's experience of divorce. It shows that children experience parental divorce as a crisis in their lives but that they are able to mobilise internal and external resources to regain a new point of balance. In doing so, children demonstrate the degree to which they are active and competent participants in the process of family dissolution. The implications of the data are then considered in relation to engaging with children involved in divorce and in relation to some of the cultural presumptions that might militate against hearing what they have to say about their experiences. Copyright © 2002 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Introduction

It seems doubtful whether any welfare professional's working week passes without some reference to 'participation' or 'engaging the user'. (It is a racing certainty that 'partnership' is mentioned on a daily basis.) As far as children are concerned, involvement in the formal operations of welfare services (which include for the purposes of this paper, the family justice system) would appear to be axiomatic (see Buchanan, 1994; Butler and Williamson, 1994; Cloke and Davies, 1995; Shemmings 1996; Pithouse and Williamson, 1997; Butler, 1997). Over recent years the attempt to engage with children, and in particular, to provide them with a 'voice' in the matter of their parents' divorce has developed considerable momentum (Piper, 1996, 1999; Buchanan and others, 2001). Yet, because it is possible to conceive of types and degrees of both formal and informal involvement in welfare practices, some more meaningful than others (Arnstein, 1972; Butler, 1996a, 1999) and because it is by no means clear that involvement has moved beyond the bounds of rhetoric (Lyon and others, 1998; Roberts, 1998; Scanlan and others, 2000; Lowe and Murch, 2001; Douglas and others, 2000b), we would suggest that it might be timely to consider again what we understand by this powerful but taken for granted idea (see Cahill, 1994). Our argument is that any informed understanding of how a child is or might be 'involved' with their parents' divorce implies as

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much a change in our collective understanding of and attitudes towards children as it implies the development of a new repertoire of skills in talking and listening to children.

This paper draws on the findings of a study conducted by the current authors and funded by the ESRC as part of the *Children 5–16 Research Programme* (Douglas and others, 2000a). For the study, a random, representative sample of recently divorced families was drawn from six courts in South Wales and the south west of England. From these families, 104 children (51 girls and 53 boys) between seven and 15 years of age were interviewed. Data were also collected from the parent with whom the children lived, allowing some comparisons between parents' and children's accounts of the experience of divorce. Our primary interests were in exploring children's views, feelings and understanding of divorce, examining their role as active participants during the process and finding out from children what the impact of parental separation and divorce had been on their lives. Children were interviewed relatively soon after the divorce itself had been obtained (on average, within 15 months of *decree nisi* being granted). In addition, a range of quantitative data was gathered using an 'activity book' developed for the purpose (see Robinson and others, forthcoming). Qualitative data were categorised into a number of overlapping fields, including: 'finding out'; 'telling others'; 'changes in my life'; 'coping and support'; 'parent–child relationships' and 'new relationships'. Data from only a few of these analytical categories are reported here.

In the first part of this paper we will illustrate how children experience their parents' divorce/separation and its immediate consequences and, in so doing, reveal themselves to be (more or less) active participants in the process. Firstly we consider the affective consequences of divorce and the part that information exchange plays in helping children manage the crisis in their lives that parental separation can provoke. Secondly, we briefly illustrate how children utilise coping mechanisms and forms of support in the immediate aftermath of the break-up. Finally, in this part of the paper, we explore ways in which children are involved (or not) in the management of post-separation 'arrangements', particularly 'contact' with the non-resident parent. In the second part of the paper, we go on to consider how adults' engagement with children (both formally and informally) might develop and expand to take into account the lived experience of children whose parents separate.

The experience of divorce

The children in our study typically experienced family breakdown and the consequent disruption to their everyday lives as a form of crisis. Whilst it is difficult to define a crisis (see O'Hagan, 1986; Coulshed, 1991) because of the way the word is so widely used and abused, professionals' use of the term tends to reflect Rapoport's (1970) definition, which describes a crisis as 'an upset in a steady state' (p. 276). This steady state has also been referred to as homeostasis or psychological equilibrium and the crisis as a turning point where 'the individual's coping resources have been surpassed and a new approach has to be developed' (Thompson, 2000, p. 79). It is in this sense that the term is used here, which is not to suggest that most children's response to their parents' separation is somehow pathological in nature.

The crisis that follows from the fact of family break-up does not appear to be mitigated by any indications children may have received that this was either imminent or inevitable. Even where children had become gradually aware of the fragility of their parents'

marriage through direct observation of arguments or even domestic violence, the effect of the events themselves was usually immediate and profound:

They called Sarah and I downstairs. We were playing. Dad was sitting on one chair, Mummy was sitting on the settee and they said they're getting divorced. I started crying like mad. I just didn't believe it.

Michael, aged ten

Well, she was crying and I said, 'What's the matter?' Richard [brother] was cuddling her. . . . So I said, 'What's happened?' And I said, 'Where's Dad?' And she just started telling me about what he said . . . and I said, 'Is he coming back?' . . . And she said, 'Well, I don't know.'. That's when it all happened. He phoned up the next morning and said, 'Oh I won't be coming back.' We just begged him for the whole, whole day. We started ringing him up every minute of the day, to say, 'Please, please come back.' and we were all crying our eyes out.

Cathy, aged 13

As far as being talked to explicitly about their parents' imminent or actual separation, it is important to note that children and adults recall this process differently.¹ Over two thirds of children (70.9 per cent)² indicated that they had been told by one or both of their parents (in the majority of cases, by their mother) about the separation with the remaining one third (29.1 per cent)³ reporting that they had been told by no one. In contrast, every parent (except one) for whom comparative data were available⁴ indicated that they had, either severally or jointly, explicitly told their children about the separation.

This discrepancy may be attributable in part to differential recall of events and age seems to have been an important consideration. Eighty-three per cent⁵ of children over the age of 12 reported that they had been told, compared to only 75 per cent⁶ of children aged between ten and 12 years. This figure drops even further for children under the age of ten of whom only 52 per cent⁷ recall being told about their parents' separation.

Interview data from both parents and children highlighted other factors to be taken into account. Divorce was a new, uncharted and stressful experience for almost everyone involved and parents and children alike often reported that they had not been sure what to say or how to say it. Parents said that they did not know what was happening themselves and did not know what to tell their children. Children in turn, felt that they did not know how to ask for the information they felt they needed. Both parents and children reported that they had shied away from talking about the divorce because each felt the need to protect the other. As Shaun (aged 12) put it: *'I didn't feel like, I mean, you know it's a bit depressing to ask somebody who is getting divorced about divorce, you know!'*

Additionally, the majority of children (56.9 per cent)⁸ reported that no one had explained to them what the breakdown of their parents marriage might mean for them in the

¹In this section we describe comparative data from the whole child and parent study population (later we will describe data from a smaller population of 'matched pairs' in which individual child responses are directly matched to their parents' response). In this section the sample for which data from both parents and children were available in answer to particular questions varied depending on the question being asked.

²In this instance, N (number of children in the data sample) = 103; n (actual number of responses) = 73.

³N = 103; n = 30.

⁴N = 99; n = 98.

⁵N = 40; n = 30.

⁶N = 32; n = 24.

⁷N = 31; n = 16.

⁸N = 102; n = 58.

immediate and longer term and a similar proportion (64.4 per cent)⁹ reported that they were not asked for their views on what was happening; in contrast, over two thirds of children (67.3 per cent¹⁰) indicated that they should have been asked. It remains the case therefore, that for a significant proportion of children, little by way of explanation or preparation had *effectively* been undertaken by parents, as far as children themselves were concerned.

Where attempts were made by parents to tell the child what was happening, the emotional experience of the child could still be overlooked:

Just very empty and lonely—as though I had no one to talk to. Because you know, all my Mum's family were like comforting her, and my Dad's family was comforting him and I thought that me and Nick [brother] had NO-ONE to go to 'cos like there were SIDES. But there wasn't really—it's just like if we went over to Mum's you know, they were too busy looking after Mum. And I know that Mum felt sorry for us as well but it's like I felt lonely—as though I had no one to go to and talk to 'cos I felt that Mum had to be comforted and Dad had to be comforted and I thought there's no-one in between for me and Nick.

Sioned, aged 12

Indeed, the assumption by children of an emotional care-taking role in relation to their parents was not uncommon. This is further illustrated below.

Being told what was happening remained a vital consideration for most children trying to restore some kind of balance in their lives. Almost all sought a degree of cognitive control over events, especially in the absence of any simple or immediate resolution of the emotional upset, anger, feelings of injustice and feelings of loss. Being left out of the explanations could feel very much like being left out altogether:

It was like, 'Oh well, it's not really your problem; you're just not going to be affected by it. You don't have to go through all the divorce things'. But, no one seemed to realise I was sort of THERE. They were all concerned with what they were doing.

Libby, aged 13

In contrast to the children's felt but not always expressed need, as we have suggested, it was apparent that many parents were choosing not to provide information in an attempt to protect their children from additional worry or upset. Some parents failed to appreciate that they were compounding their children's confusion and their uncertainty about the future.

A: *I thought it was all fine, except for the fact that they were all SHOUTING at each other down the phone and stuff like that and knowing that Roger [father] wouldn't let me know things, hide it all from me. I could see what was going on but he just wouldn't tell me.*

Q: *What sort of things did you want to know?*

A: *Enough to keep me not confused. You know, it would be all this rowing and stuff and what it would be like, 'What?! What's this about now?' 'And he wouldn't explain anything to me... you know when is this going to be ended, and stuff like that.*

Oliver, aged 13

⁹N = 101; n = 65.

¹⁰N = 98; n = 66.

In the absence of explanations from parents, children gathered information about separation and divorce from a variety of sources, especially friends, but also from television. Unfortunately, this latter was a source of much seriously misleading information, especially as this turned on the legal processes now underway.

Consistently however, children expressed the view that they wanted to know what was happening, even if they couldn't 'take it all in' at the time. Not only would this have helped them deal with their shock, sadness and anxiety for the future, it might also have helped shape the pattern of future relationships:

A: I just wanted to know why she did it. . . . I wanted some answers . . . and Mum didn't want to give me any answers. . . . It would've been better if she'd told me then maybe we'd have a closer relationship now.

Q: Do you think if she'd sat down and explained it to you that it would've helped?

A: Yea, I think it would've . . . 'cos if we knew the truth, then we could've just cleared the air but that didn't happen, it's still going on now. You never talk about it, but it's still there.

Susan, aged 14

Coping and support

We have opportunity here to provide only a limited account of the coping strategies and support mechanisms employed by children to help them deal with their parents' divorce. Our main purpose in this section is to draw attention to the capacity of children to seek out and use appropriate and available help both from within their own resources and with the aid of others.

Children frequently reported the value of being able to distract themselves from what was going on, especially by 'doing stuff' with friends or by keeping busy at home. Other frequently reported distractions were listening to music, playing electronic games and sport, which also, in some cases, helped to relieve emotional pressure:

I was quite interested in tennis and I played a lot more football, because if I was angry or upset I'd just kick the ball at the wall and it would sort of cool me down.

Ted, aged ten

Most children reported the value of being able to cry about what had happened to them although many were aware that this often had to be done in private:

A: Sometimes I get really upset and I cry in my room because I think everything's gone. It's all gone away, I haven't got anything.

Q: Is there any particular times when you feel like that?

A: Sometimes it just happens. It normally happens when I come up and go into my bedroom.

Q: Do you tell Mummy if you feel like that?

A: No, I just quickly wash my face and come downstairs and act happy. Then I forget about it and then I'm normal.

Rosie, aged ten

Other children reported how quiet reflection, sometimes writing down their thoughts, helped them think through what was happening to them and to put matters into perspective. This enabled children to re-frame their experience in a more positive way, often by thinking about the good things that were happening in their lives. It was a very small minority of children who reported less adaptive responses (such as avoidance or 'magical thinking').

In terms of seeking support from others, parents were the most obvious actual or potential providers of emotional support, information and advice for children with the resident parent usually best placed to help. Some children regretted the more limited access they had to their non-custodial parent, especially if a difficulty arose with the parent with day-to-day care of the child. Not all children received support from their parents however, with some being thought by their children as unable to help simply because they did not understand what the child was experiencing. As Rosie continued to explain:

Q: *Do you think your Mum and Dad know what it's like for you?*

A: *It didn't happen to them, so I'm not sure. I think . . . sometimes if you're crying in front of them and they say, 'I know what it's like.' You might say, 'No you don't', because it's not happening to them and if it hasn't happened to them then sometimes you think, 'How do they know what it's like, they're not me?'*

Other children recognised that their parents were too upset themselves to help or, at the other end of the scale, had 'moved on' such that they did not wish to be reminded of what had happened in the past:

A: *I don't know how she felt . . . she has someone to talk to about it now. We don't get a word in anymore. . . .*

Q: *You don't really have anyone to talk to about it?*

A: *My Mum was talking to us, it's just up to now. She doesn't seem to want to talk about it any more, she's got a new life now, she doesn't want to talk about it.*

Cathy, aged 13

Friends were an extremely important source of support for children (see also Butler and Williamson, 1994 and Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001). For many, it was with their peers that children had their most significant relationships, especially for those children who found it more difficult to draw support from their parents. Selected, close friends (children maintained their desire to keep their parents' divorce largely a private matter) were represented as more likely to understand, especially if they too had experience of divorce; as 'speaking the same language' as the child and as being more accessible and available:

I don't want maybe ten friends to tell, I just need a few friends. And if I have any more support I think I've gotta I'd better tell them the whole story, you know. I've got to think about what to say to them. I've gotta . . . you know. I think, three is enough, because they're close to me and they understand me and they'll listen to me, going on! They'll really . . . they CARE, so.

Louise, aged 12

Relatives, especially grandparents, were another valued source of support to children, particularly as a source of time, attention and reassurance during periods of uncertainty. Grandparents' homes were often viewed as 'safe' or 'neutral' territory in which to take

refuge from what was happening at home. Children recognised that grandparents often played a part in supporting (not least in practical ways) their parent(s) through the divorce and provided this did not result in taking sides, this was appreciated.

Children were more likely to be ambivalent about the support available from teachers. Some found individual teachers helpful and most were glad that teachers 'knew', not so much to enable them to offer support but more so that they could take account of any changes in the child's behaviour. Few children turned to their brothers and sisters for support, either because they were too young, too close to the problem themselves, because they didn't get on with them or because they understood and were experiencing the divorce differently. Professional support did not feature significantly in many children's lives although some children did comment positively on the support they received from 'Childline'.

As well as seeking support from others, children also reported being a source of emotional and practical support for their parents. This latter often took the form of greater participation in household chores. Emotional support usually took the form of reassurance, especially for the resident parent and the age of the child was no predictor of the creativeness or genuineness of their efforts:

I try to talk to my mother, like if she gets upset, I tell her like, 'Yea well, lets just get it sorted out'. and things like that and she sort of perks up a bit, and then I just make her laugh about it. And say, 'Just you think how it's gonna be'. If things got better, like if we were going to be millionaires, win the lottery and things like that. And I goes, 'What would you do with a million pounds?' She went, 'I'd go and buy a villa in Minorca.' We used to go (laugh), 'Yea, in your dreams'. and we used to laugh about it, and things like that and she sort of perks up a bit and so yea, we do help each other through it.

Claire, aged ten

Making arrangements

Finally, and too briefly in this part of the paper, we consider children's active involvement in managing some of the changes that follow from divorce.¹¹ Children largely conceived of the changes likely to come about as a consequence of the parents' divorce in terms of loss. That most acutely felt was in relation to the absent parent and the 'empty space' in the child's life that s/he would leave. They also feared the loss of friends and possibly having to leave their school. In attempting to hold on to as much continuity in their lives as possible and to recover a sense of normality (a new 'steady state'), children were also anxious about the possibility of further deterioration in their parents' relationship, the prospect of their parents' future happiness and their own financial and domestic circumstances. In the event, most children reported that the consequences of the divorce were not as bad as had been anticipated. The majority of children reported significant improvements both in their relationships with their parents (after any initial deterioration) and in terms of their understanding of the world and their own personal growth and development. They spoke compassionately about their parents' happiness and their own, more mature appreciation of them as people. Nonetheless, a great deal of post-divorce/

¹¹In this section we report from a population of directly 'matched data' in which individual child responses are matched to their parents' response. Matched data were available for 82 child-parent pairs.

separation 'business' had to be conducted, particularly in relation to settling living arrangements and 'contact' before any new 'balance' could be struck.

It is important to note that most children reported that they were not consulted (59.7 per cent)¹² over the crucial decision of their residence. Where children were asked, it was usually for a view on decisions that had already been made:

I went along with most of it. I think Mum had said we were gonna change schools and then we looked around and that was the only school really with vacancies and one we wanted... some we didn't particularly want to go to. But I don't think I had much choice in whether I was GOING to move schools or stay at this school. 'cos I think I was definitely moving school, but it was sort of I had choice in which one.

Rhiannon, aged 14

However, over half of the children (57.3 per cent)¹³ did report that their views had influenced the decision about where they should live. Interestingly, again parents recall this differently with a higher proportion reporting that they had consulted their child (54.8 per cent compared to 40.2 per cent)¹⁴ but with a lower proportion reporting that their child's view had influenced the decision (51.2 per cent compared to 57.3 per cent).¹⁵ Substantially as a function of age and gender, children were more actively consulted in decision making about contact, although, once again, not to the same degree that parents reported. In relation to both contact and residence however, children were strong in their belief, expressed in terms of rights and fairness, that their opinion was important and to be asked for it even more so. Even quite young children felt that they had something important to add to the decisions that were being taken about and around them:

Q: *Did you think it was a good idea that your parents asked who you wanted to live with?*

A: *Yes, because they'd know exactly what I wanted... more of exactly what I wanted, not what they wanted.*

Rachel, aged ten

Older children too felt that age should not be a barrier to inclusion, other than at the extremes:

Q: *Do you think children of any age should be asked [with whom they want to live], or do you think only older children should be asked?*

A: *Three years and up... 'cos two and one are really a baby, wouldn't really understand would they?*

Gareth, aged 15

Perhaps unsurprisingly, those children who reported consultation or influence over the making of arrangements for both contact and residence also reported higher degrees of satisfaction with the arrangements made.

Contact arrangements, much more than arrangements concerning residence, were subject to a degree of continuing negotiation between parents and children, however. In a very

¹²Matched data: N = 82; n = 49.

¹³Matched data: N = 82; n = 47.

¹⁴Matched data: N = 82; n = 46.

¹⁵Matched data: N = 82; n = 42.

real sense, contact, in both its practical and emotional senses, has to be 'learned'. Children described the practical difficulties of having 'two homes' and the tiresomeness of having to constantly pack and re-pack bags; they commented on the lack of space at their non-resident parent's (often temporary) new home; they spoke of the difficulties in spending time with parents' new partners, either because they simply didn't get on with them or because they felt that they might be seen to be betraying the parent with whom they usually lived; they talked of how it was often difficult to find things to do that suited their brothers or sisters (with whom otherwise they might not spend a great deal of time) and how sometimes they would have appreciated seeing their parent on their own. On a practical level, children demonstrated their growing capacity to manage their 'time maps' in ways and to a degree that children from 'intact' families seldom have to and they did so in situations that were sometimes highly charged emotionally and in which children had to develop a capacity to weigh and balance a number of competing demands.

It is interesting to note that in their accounts of contact arrangements, many children used the language of time as a metaphor, particularly if they lacked the perception and emotional vocabulary to describe the nature and quality of their family relationships and feelings in other ways—a problem which seemed to affect boys more than girls. Thus, a number were concerned about how much time they could spend with each parent. The metaphor was also used to describe the competition with their siblings for their parents' time (i.e. their attention). While others said they resented their parents 'giving time' (i.e. in other words affection) to new partners, step siblings and half siblings.

Overall, the children's descriptions of their feelings about contact with their non-resident parent, highlighted the emotional 'highs' and 'lows' that they experience as a result of spending part of their lives with one parent and part with the other. While many of the children looked forward to and enjoyed contact with their non-resident parent they often, at the same time, missed their resident parent and other elements of normal home life. Likewise, when at home with their resident parent they missed their non-resident parent and looked forward to their next contact:

Q: *How do you feel if you're about to move from one home to the next home?*

A: *If I'm in one I miss the other 'cos then if I'm at the other I'll miss the other one. I miss both of them really. When I'm here . . . whether I'm here or I'm over at my Mum's.*

Maggie, aged ten

Whilst children were concerned that contact arrangements should be 'fair' to all parties, they were particularly concerned that they should remain flexible. Given what we have noted already about the importance of friends and children's desire for continuity and 'normality', it was important to children that the 'rest of their lives' were also factored into contact arrangements:

I wouldn't like to see [Dad] every half-term because I like, for a week I can stay over at a friend's houses and see my friends a lot and friends are important to me and I couldn't see him every other weekend because I wouldn't see my friends then. I don't know, I would like it to be more, but it really couldn't.

Damian, aged 13

Contact could also provide the opportunity for 'unfinished business' between parents to be conducted. Children might be asked intrusive questions by one parent about the other,

be asked to pass hostile messages or even be the subject of 'doorstep arguments.' This could make children feel they were the cause of their parents' continuing animosity. Some children saw it as their role to be the messenger in some of these exchanges—in order to prevent more explosive confrontation, another example of the emotional 'care taking' carried on by some children. But most wished that their parents could at least 'speak as friends' when it came to matters concerning the children. We were impressed by the way that most children who had experienced the worst kind of parental behaviour developed effective self protective ways of coping with it, for example, coming to the conclusion that the problems lay between their parents and not themselves.

Discussion

The most obvious point to make in the light of the findings reported here is that children *are* involved in the process of their parents' divorce in that they experience the events probably on much the same emotional terms as the adults. The initial experience is one of dis-equilibrium and emotional upset followed by a period of adjustment in which new domestic arrangements have to be learned in an atmosphere that can remain emotionally turbulent for some time. We do not make any observations on the likely long-term effects of this experience, that has been debated extensively elsewhere (see Rodgers and Pryor, 1998). What we are suggesting, is that this experience needs to be understood and, even more importantly, respected and valued in its own right. We do not imagine that this point needs to be made to those whose work daily brings them into contact with children experiencing divorce or any other significant transition in their lives. However, it may need reinforcing for those who hitherto might have chosen to discount or disregard children's own accounts of their experience. Here we must allow the possibility that any resistance to recognising children as 'our unit of observation and as mediators of information' (Qvartrup, 1994, p. 6) may be borne out of unwillingness as much as unfamiliarity.

The modern sociological orthodoxy whereby childhood is understood as a social artefact, varying across time and between cultures, (see Archard, 1993; Butler, 1996b; James and Prout, 1997; Lee, 2001) has served to emphasise that children are to be understood as human *beings* rather than human *becomings*. Our study offers further proof of this. Reluctance to recognise the dislocation, loss and confusion described by children but which anyone of us, at any age, might find ourselves faced with in similar circumstances, may be culturally constituted (see Aries, 1960; de Mause, 1976; Shorter, 1976; Stone, 1977; Pollock, 1983; MacFarlane, 1986 for example) but it must also be recognised as a powerful defence against a personal recognition of the distress caused to many children when their parents' marriage ends. There may even be a conflict of generational interests here. By not registering or acknowledging the lived experience of children in such circumstances, we might, with greater ease and less discomfort, be able to focus on what adults need or want when their relationships founder.

We do not intend to speculate further on whether this is another instance of the 'middle years conspiracy'. We would however wish to raise the possibility that the degree to which children's accounts of their experience of divorce (or any other matter) is able to influence the actions of adults is not substantially a function of our formal skills in communicating with children. Nor is it necessarily a consequence of the deficiencies in the procedures that

we put in place to facilitate such communication. Rather, it is a reflection of our attitudes to what children have to tell us. It is not that we do not know what they have to say (in some instances) or couldn't find out. It is more that we simply do not want to hear it.

If the actual experience of divorce for children is to be factored into any response we might make, either as professionals, parents or simply as interested adults, the children in this study have indicated some important areas for us to reflect upon: we might need to recognise children's own pace and sense of 'balance' in the timing of formal proceedings; we might have to recognise the difficulty that children have in expressing their emotions and be sensitive to their use of metaphor and alternative forms of expressing emotion, like crying; we would need to recognise the real importance of a child's friends and to take these into account as much as any other factor when the post-divorce arrangements are being brokered and we would need to differentiate between children who each experience their parents' divorce uniquely, even if they are members of the same family, for example. We would also have to take into account children's competence in resolving the crisis themselves and the part they play in managing the crisis for others.

The children in our study demonstrated a resilience and coping capacity that might surprise some. It certainly might surprise those parents (and probably many professionals) who did not or could not tell children what was happening. Children want to be told what is going on and consulted on the important decisions that are made about them during this life-altering time. Regaining cognitive control of events was central to most children's attempts to regain a new 'steady state' and being left out of discussions tended to increase anxiety and upset. Children also demonstrated that they have an active role in helping their parents cope with divorce, even in circumstances where parents did not seem able to contain their more negative emotions and impulses. Children also showed how they acquire new skills in managing the time-maps of the altered lives, maintain a compassionate interest in what is happening to their parents and, in most cases, reach a settled understanding of what has happened to them. All of this is to make the point that children do not experience their parents' divorce passively. Their involvement is an active, creative and resourceful one. Recognising children as competent (as well as relevant) witnesses to the process of family dissolution may further assist the process whereby their accounts are attended to and valued.

Conclusion

We do not seek to privilege children's accounts of their experience of divorce. We do not see why either parents' or children's interests should predominate. But we do want to argue strongly that children's accounts be rendered on the same terms and weighed equally in the balance. We have made the point, indirectly, that parents cannot be considered an entirely reliable source of information on the child's experience of divorce (see also Mitchell, 1985; Moore and others, 1996; James and James, 1999). In critical areas, they tell very different stories of what transpired. In this sense, children are not only relevant and competent witnesses to the process of their parent's divorce, they are also the most reliable witnesses of their own experience.

It is our contention that involving children in their parents' divorce, both in formal, professional and in familial contexts can be more usefully understood if it starts from a

recognition that it is we (as adult professionals or simply as professional adults) who need to find our place in a complex personal and social dynamic in which children are already active participants rather than they who need to mesh with systems, practices and procedures that are designed to meet ends more allied to our particular interests and habits of thought. Children know what they think of their experience and can point to ways in which we, as adults, might help them deal with their experiences. They are the best witnesses to that experience and we, as adults, have as much to gain from our involvement with them as they have from their involvement with us. As one young person put it:

Q: *Is there anything that could be done, that would help you? By other people? Or . . . ?*

A: *Probably, if more people understood what it was like to go through divorce, and if they knew what it was like to, experience how bad it was.*

Q: *What sort of people would need to know?*

A: *Probably more children would need to know. More adults would have to understand children's feelings; others have to understand what children feel. Not what they feel, but what the children feel about it.*

Q: *Do you think any adults do understand what children feel?*

A: *Some of them do, but a lot think well, they have feelings, but they don't care that much about it, because they're only kids, they don't like care but a lot of children do suffer from it and they just don't know what to do. They're like me! They don't know what to do. (laughs).*

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